Conceptions of Equity: How Influential Actors View a Contested Concept

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Conceptions of Equity: How Influential Actors View a Contested Concept

Katrina E. Bulkley
Montclair State University

Discussions of educational equity have played an important role in educational policy in the United States over the past 50 years, and advocates with a broad range of perspectives on reform have sought to claim the equity mantle. In this article, I examine aspects of equity, including the distribution of “inputs” to public education, the process of delivering education, and the outcomes of the educational process. I surveyed a series of experts in educational policy to identify influential actors in national debates. Based on that survey, I conducted 12 semistructured interviews with individuals and representatives of organizations identified as “influential,” and collected documents from the same groups. Beliefs about equity among those with influence are both nuanced and, at times, in tension with other perspectives on equity. Important areas of common ground include an emphasis on outcomes as an important component of an equitable system of public education and a focus on groups identified as having been treated inequitably in the past. Despite common ground, critical differences emerged throughout this process. One clear point of differentiation was between those who focused on addressing issues of equity through market-oriented reforms and those who focused more on issues of school-level practices.

INTRODUCTION

Many educational reforms are based, at least in part, on arguments that making the changes advocated will enhance equity. However, the use of the concept of equity is often vague (Unterhalter, 2009). Although this issue focuses on discussions of equity in the context of equal opportunity, this is not the only way in which the concept is understood, nor is it necessarily the dominant understanding of those now in positions of power. In this article, I step back in order to consider different aspects of the equity concept itself among those with influence in national policy discussions. Building on interviews with individuals and representatives of organizations identified through a survey of experts identified as “influential,” alongside documents from the same groups, I find that beliefs about equity have important nuances tied both to conventional ideology and to varied perspectives on the best direction for educational reform.

I begin by exploring the concept of equity itself, particularly in the context of policy. Equity is often used as a catch-all term in policy discussions for issues connected with the education of groups identified by policymakers as disadvantaged. Equity actually has a range of meanings.
however, and understanding the variations in how the concept itself is used is critical to unpacking the thinking of influential actors. I find that conventional distinctions about equity in terms of the distribution of resources and attention to the needs of specific groups of students, while still relevant, do not fully capture key pieces of the debate, including how the overall structures of U.S. public schools enhance or detract from equitable education.

EQUITY AND POLICY

Broadly speaking, equity can be thought of as “fairness” and is tied to both characteristics of a system (in this case, publicly funded education) and processes (in this case, the ongoing work within that system towards fairness; Unterhalter, 2009). Although one can argue for objective measures of equality (such as in terms of dollars per student), Levin (2010) pointed out that “there is no natural state of educational equity, but one defined by each society on the basis of its values and the imperative that it sets for the issue as a moral commitment” (p. 3). With this in mind, I seek to better understand the variations in how those with influence identify equity “problems” in the context of public policy, how they explain the existence of those problems, and thus the implications they draw about policy prescriptions (Kingdon, 1995; Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

Broad conceptions of equity have often focused on the distribution of scarce resources, including whether the actual distribution of a resource is equitable and whether the process by which it was distributed is equitable (Stone, 1997). Gutón and Oakes (1995) lay out three core positions around equity: Libertarian, with a focus on procedurally fair processes and ideas of meritocracy (see also Gutmann, 1987); Liberal, which builds on libertarian ideas but places greater emphasis on ensuring that “uneven distribution is based on fair competition” and incorporates ideas of compensatory education (p. 329); and Democratic Liberal, which moves beyond liberal to focus on “redistribution to obtain some threshold level of performance” (p. 331).

Gutón and Oakes’s core positions each deal differently with three aspects of equity—“inputs,” processes, and outcomes. Discussions of the distribution of resources are more clearly tied to the first two aspects (Levin, 2010). The concepts of “equal opportunity” and “opportunity to learn” are also tied to debates about both inputs and processes. McDonnell (1995) described how inputs are combined with classroom processes in order to provide students with an opportunity to learn the expected material, skills, and so on. Here, the concept of opportunity to learn is folded into the broader discussions of inputs and processes, for it is within these ideas that a range of perspectives about what is needed to provide students with an “opportunity to learn” can be found.

These different aspects of equity are importantly grounded in what Stone (1997) talks of as policy “boundaries.” One set of boundaries involves which groups are considered relevant for comparison; drawing such boundaries is challenging, because how groups are defined is, in itself, potentially politically contested. For example, what does it mean to say that a family is “low-income”? Another important boundary involves what policies are relevant to discussions of public education. For example, are policies/policy problems not directly tied to public education (such as health care and housing policies) relevant to discussions of policies designed to improve educational equity and quality?
Inputs

An equal distribution of scarce resources is only one form of “equitable” distribution (Stone, 1997). The distribution of financial resources, especially within state, has been central to policy conceptions of equity. Of particular importance has been the legal debate about whether treating students equally in terms of resources, or ensuring the provision of an “adequate” education, is a more equitable approach (Aleman, 2006; Baker & Green, 2008). Actual dollars are not, however, the only resources that are distributed through policy and other decisions in public education. I consider inputs as identified by influential actors such as the distribution of highly experienced teachers, quality facilities, and so on, as secondary inputs in public education.

Processes

Although inputs have often been the focus of equity debates in the policy sphere, the process of delivering public education in terms of both educational practice and system or governance structures are particularly relevant to the idea of equity. Levin’s (2010) discussion of process emphasizes issues such as the breadth and depth of courses and curriculum, instructional quality, and the extent of stratification or segregation of students by socioeconomic and immigrant status. Others have talked in greater depth about specific equity issues in the context of school and classroom practices, such as work on culturally responsive teaching and student tracking (e.g., see Rubin, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Some argue that another important contributor to inequity are the ways in which the system of public education is organized, both in terms of its formal governance structures (i.e., school boards) and the codified practices within those structures (such as teacher tenure, teacher and student assignment policies, and tracking). Although not as frequently discussed as resources to be distributed, many processes can be considered in this light. For example, Jencks (1988) discussed teachers’ allocation of their attention in the classroom as a scarce resource. Proponents of school choice, including school vouchers (sometimes identified in equity-linked language such as “opportunity scholarships”), often argue that a system that allows wealthier but not poor parents to make choices is inherently inequitable (Peterson, 2002).

Outcomes

Finally, equity discussions can focus on the outcomes of an educational system; for Levin (2010), “educational outcomes refer to the success of individuals and identifiable groups in the population in achieving specific educational goals” (p. 5). Gutmann (1987) argued that true equalization of outcomes is not realistic, but that a democratic state “must take steps to avoid those inequalities that deprive children of educational attainment adequate to participate in the political processes” (p. 134, emphasis added). However, as with inputs and processes, there is not a simple definition for what would make outcomes equitable, whether in terms of achievement on a variety of measures, attainment, or participation in an educational system.
METHODOLOGY

The first stage of data collection for this study involved a survey of experts on educational politics and policy, modeled on Swanson and Barlage’s (2006) study of influence in educational policy. The survey was sent to a sample drawn from lists of important individuals from the “media, policymakers, think tanks, university-based academics, professional organizations, advocacy groups, and foundations” (Swanson & Barlage, 2006, p. 4). In total, the survey, conducted online using SurveyMonkey.com, was sent to 728 individuals in May 2011; 135 people provided usable responses. This response rate of 18.5% is consistent with the low response rates often found when conducting expert surveys, as experts are generally less likely to respond to surveys (Rich, 2004).

Among the open-ended questions asked were ones that requested respondents to, separately, identify individuals and organizations that had “been the most influential in shaping K-12 educational policy during the past 10 years” and that “have become increasingly influential in shaping K-12 education policy during the past 10 years.” Based on these results, I identified those individuals and organizations that received at least 10 nominations in either category. As building a sample for an expert survey is an imperfect exercise, the response rates are lower than in other types of surveys, and there is potential for response bias that cannot be clearly identified; these results are most appropriately treated as identifying a group of individuals and organizations that have influence, rather than as a definitive list of who has the most influence. Table 1 lists the individuals and organizations identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizations</th>
<th>Individuals</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linked Organization and Individuals*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Enterprise Institute (AEI)</strong></td>
<td>Rick Hess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>American Federation of Teachers (AFT)</strong></td>
<td>Randi Weingarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Education Trust</strong></td>
<td>Kati Haycock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thomas B. Fordham Institute</strong></td>
<td>Chester Finn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation</td>
<td>Bill Gates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>U.S. Department of Education (USDOE)</strong></td>
<td>Secretary of Education Arne Duncan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Additional (Unlinked) Organizations and Individuals</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Achieve</strong></td>
<td>President Barack Obama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broad Foundation</strong></td>
<td>Governor Jeb Bush</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Center for American Progress (CAP)</strong></td>
<td>Linda Darling-Hammond</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Center on Education Policy (CEP)</strong></td>
<td>Joel Klein</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)</strong></td>
<td>Representative George Miller</td>
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<tr>
<td>KIPP</td>
<td>Diane Ravitch</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Education Association (NEA)**</td>
<td>Michelle Rhee</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Governors Association (NGA)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>The New Teacher Project (TNTP)**</td>
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<td>Teach for America (TFA)**</td>
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*An organization and affiliated individual are both included only when each independently received 10 or more nominations as highly and/or increasingly influential. **Indicates that an interview was conducted with a representative of this organization; if an individual affiliated with that organization is also identified, that individual may or may not have been the person interviewed.
For the interview phase of the study, every organization and individual just listed was contacted, and organizational representatives were asked to identify the most appropriate person to interview if a specific individual named in the survey results was unavailable. In total, 12 interviews were conducted with people and/or representatives of organizations on this list. The semistructured interviews focused on gathering data about the core philosophies and beliefs around public education of the individuals interviewed. Interviews were supplemented with 52 documents, including congressional testimony, op-eds, articles, and policy statements. Documents were collected from all organizations and individuals mentioned, but I made a particular effort to collect documents from those not interviewed. Interview and document data are inherently different, but I used both to get the most complete data possible, as well as to triangulate findings from the interviews. Data were coded using NVivo, with a combination of deductive and inductive codes. The patterns identified through this coding form the foundation of the findings.

**FINDINGS**

To understand varying perspectives on equity, I first looked at how those with influence talk and write about different aspects of equity. Then, where appropriate, I grouped together those who shared perspectives around specific facets. Although some actors did often end up in the same “space” for multiple aspects of equity, there were also many cases in which actors were similar in some areas but differed in others. For example, many actors shared common ground around the equitable distribution of fiscal resources but varied substantially in terms of the processes of equitable education. Broadly speaking, these actors shared an egalitarian/Democratic Liberal position in terms of the purposes of education, with an emphasis on addressing the needs of disadvantaged students, but some emphasized using traditional structures, whereas others advocated alternative, market-based approaches (Guitón & Oakes, 1995). The most substantive contrast to this shared egalitarian purpose came at times from scholars from AEI and the Fordham Institute, whose ideas most closely matched the Libertarian position and reflected a vision of equity that focused less on disadvantaged students.

Other common ground revolved around the identification of groups that those with influence argue are currently treated inequitably and thus should be the focus of reforms to enhance equity. These groups were largely those identified as subgroups under No Child Left Behind—particularly children from families with low-income, Black, and Latino students; English Language Learners; and students who receive special education services. However, the idea of focusing on these groups, defined by many as having greater needs than other groups, was not universal; for example, a scholar from AEI argued that “[equity] is increasingly understood through the lens of . . . people who see no moral complexity at all in . . . focusing on one group of kids at the expense of others.” He made the case that such a focus potentially diminished equity by making others groups of students less of an emphasis.

**Inputs**

*Financial resources.* Overall, many of those included in this study offered critiques of the current system of funding schools. A representative of the U.S. Department of Education argued that “our whole student financing system in this country in general is . . . broken” (personal communication, December 12, 2011). The predominant focus of influentials was not on additional
funding but on the distribution of existing resources, which can be identified as inequitable in several ways. One possible means of identifying inequities is in the funding for students in high-poverty schools. Many influential noted that the current system often leads to lower levels of funding for students in high-poverty schools, although the variation across states was also discussed. For example, a representative of the NGA argued, "You can't talk about equity without raising the issue of financial resources. ... We need to fundamentally rethink the way that state revenues are collected and disbursed to schools around the states" (personal communication, December 13, 2011). This diagnosis of inequity points to funding allocations not only between districts but also between schools within districts, a sentiment that was expressed, in one form or another, by representatives from a range of organizations and individuals. A representative of CAP raised concerns about the need to ensure that comparisons of funding between schools are, indeed, appropriately comparable—specifically, that teacher salaries (and, thus, the level of experience and education of the teachers) are included in comparisons.

Second, many of those included in this study made the case that equitable funding does not necessarily mean equal funding, and that, consistent with both Liberal and Democratic Liberal positions, more money should go to students with additional needs, including low-income students, and to schools that serve high proportions of students with such needs. For example, a representative of CCSSO argued that "[equity is] about providing the same opportunities in all places in this country for students to have the same outcomes. That might mean in D.C., the spending per pupil needs to be much higher than in a suburban area" (personal communication, January 4, 2012). This general sentiment was expressed by a range of groups, from the AFT and NEA to the Education Trust and TFA. Weighted student funding was offered as one specific policy solution by those interviewed from both the conservative Fordham Institute and centrist CAP. This approach, in which such students would bring more money to the schools they attend, is both consistent with the idea of providing additional funding to students identified as having greater needs and with structural changes around ideas of choice.

There was not unanimity, however, in support for providing additional resources to low-income students and the schools that serve them. Scholars from AEI and Fordham both raised concerns with this approach, arguing from a more meritocratic perspective that careful consideration of the overall consequences of focusing resources on some students must be included in any discussions. As an interviewee from the Fordham Institute said,

There are tradeoffs here, in terms of where you put time, energy and money. Do you put, for example, your emphasis on at-risk kids or gifted kids? Do you put your emphasis on black and brown kids, or on Asian or white kids?

Secondary resource distribution. Although money is the primary scarce resource distributed to support public education, the way that money is spent to purchase secondary resources was also a substantial focus of those with influence. In particular, influential actors focused on the links between lower fiscal resources for schools with large percentages of low-income students and other resources thus available to those students. For example, a representative from Achieve made the case,

We typically provide schools that serve large percentages in numbers of low-income and minority students with the weakest instructional resources. They're the ones that will be most likely to have the least experience, least well-prepared teachers. They're likely to have greater turnover in staff. They're
likely to have a less orderly and focused school climate, etc. (personal communication, November 30, 2011)

Although a wide variety of secondary resources are considered important inputs for an equitable system, including class size and quality facilities, the most widely voiced concerns centered on the idea that good teachers are critical. The distribution of high-quality teachers was a focus of critique by actors including the AFT, NEA, CEP, Education Trust, the New Teacher Project (TNTP), the Gates Foundation, and President Obama. The explanations for high turnover, low levels of experience, and so on, in schools serving children in poverty included both lower salaries and working conditions in these schools (e.g., see Darling-Hammond, 2010).

Although there was broad agreement about the need for higher quality teachers in high-poverty schools, consistent with recent debates around teacher evaluation, a single consistent definition of “quality” did not exist. For example, Diane Ravitch (2011), in keeping with the NEA and AFT, defined quality in part as completing a M.A. Others, including the Gates Foundation, TNTP, and Michelle Rhee, focused not on traditional measures such as years of experience or degree completion but on evidence of teacher effectiveness in improving student learning. Yet others sought a “middle ground,” such as a representative of CEP who spoke about the need for “a fair distribution of experienced teachers and teachers with higher verbal abilities, higher teaching abilities, [and] higher degrees” (personal communication, October 26, 2011).

AEI’s Rick Hess (2011) challenged the overall consensus around a need to provide more high-quality teachers to schools that serve large numbers of children in poverty, arguing that “policies that seek to shift the ‘best’ teachers to schools and classrooms serving low-achieving children represent a frontal assault on middle-class and affluent families” (p. 125). In other words, he argued that efforts to increase the availability of quality teachers for children in poverty would potentially diminish equity for other families.

Drawing policy domain boundaries. Although the primary focus of resource discussions related specifically to education, some influential also drew the boundaries for policy relevant to public education more broadly, arguing that policymakers should also discuss areas related to children in poverty, including health care, nutrition, and so on (Stone, 1997). Ravitch (2010) captured this perspective, also voiced by the AFT, NEA and Linda Darling-Hammond, when she said that

our schools cannot be improved if we ignore the disadvantages associated with poverty that affect children’s ability to learn. . . . Our schools cannot be improved if we use them as society’s all-purpose punching bag, blaming them for the ills of the economy, the burdens imposed on children by poverty, the dysfunction of families, and the erosion of civility. Schools must work with other institutions and cannot replace them. (p. 229)

The clearest contrast to this perspective comes not through an argument that external factors such as poverty are irrelevant, but from the position of organizations including KIPP and the New Teachers Project that such outside issues should not be an “excuse” for low performance. One of KIPP’s “Pillars” states that “KIPP schools have clearly defined and measurable high expectations for academic achievement and conduct that make no excuses based on the students’ backgrounds” (KIPP, n.d.). Inequity, from this perspective, can be furthered by attention to outside influences if those influences are used as a justification for low performance.
Processes

For the most part, the diagnoses of inequities offered by those included in this study incorporated problem definitions that linked with their own broad positions related to educational reform. It is in the area of processes, rather than inputs or outcomes, that these preferences are most clearly shown. Here, I separate those discussions that focused on problems within the existing system of public education from those that emphasize the system itself as a significant source of inequity, especially of inequitable outcomes.

**Working within existing structures to enhance equity.** Many individuals cited concerns about the impact of processes on equity, with many of these problems and concerns closely tied to currently popular solutions. Issues such as weak standards, curricula, and assessments were identified as contributing to equity issues by several organizations and individuals, including Achieve and Linda Darling-Hammond. The emphasis on these issues is consistent with the current advocacy of the Common Core Standards. Vicki Phillips (2010) of the Gates Foundation captured this sentiment in her statement that a core focus for the foundation is “to fundamentally shift the national consciousness about the power of high standards and the power of great teaching in helping low-income, minority children achieve—and change the course of their lives.”

Although standards and assessments at the state level are clearly within the policy domain, many of the influential practices within schools as critically important for equitable education, including inequities created by tracking, curriculum differentiation, and even the traditional structure of school (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Alongside school-level considerations were discussions of the role of classroom instruction in promoting equity. For example, Dennis Van Roekel of the NEA argued that, to keep good teachers in high-needs schools, there must be “a commitment to creative teaching and learning inquiry,” and not scripted instruction (“Teacher Equity,” 2009, p. 25).

**Structural change and equity.** Although most respondents argued for changes in resource allocations to better address the needs of students with additional needs, some made the case that inequities of the system are to some extent the result of the system itself and that addressing structural issues is necessary to enhance equity. Although a range of structural changes, from altering the tax system to removing fixed salary schedules to offering alternatives to traditional university-based preparation for teachers and leaders, have been suggested by those with influence, the most frequently mentioned structural changes are built around ideas tied to markets (Bulkley & Burch, 2011).

For some of these individuals and organizations, changing the structures of public education—predominantly through increasing choice and engaging new organizations in the work of public education—is a central tenet to the creation of an equitable system. This group includes AEI, the Broad Foundation, the Fordham Institute, Governor Jeb Bush, Michelle Rhee, and Joel Klein. Those who sought to enhance equity through substantial, usually market-oriented changes in the processes for delivering public education were among those least likely to discuss school and classroom practices that hinder or promote equity. This is consistent with a portfolio management model approach, in which advocates assume that different providers will adopt varied practices to meet the needs of the children they serve (Bulkley, Henig, & Levin, 2010). Others focused their diagnoses for inequity on practices that operated largely within the
existing structures. These practices, they argued, could be addressed within the broad contours of the existing system. This included Achieve, the AFT, CCSSO, NEA, NGA, and Linda Darling-Hammond.

Finally, a number of individuals and organizations walked the line between these perspectives, offering both diagnoses and solutions to issues of inequity that focused on working within existing structures while incorporating ideas of market-linked reforms and altered structures. For example, a representative of the Education Trust argued,

> When current conversations about what to do with our lowest performing schools did not include allowing students to get out of them even those of us here at Ed Trust who are not enamored of choice as a powerful strategy more generally said, “you’ve got to provide it here.” To tell children that they have to wait while we improve their school if they’re in one of the worst performing schools in their state is simply unacceptable. (personal communication, November 10, 2011).

Among those who take this approach are CAP, CEP, the Gates Foundation, TFA, TNTP, the U.S. Department of Education under secretary Arne Duncan, and President Obama.

**Technology and equity.** A small but potentially important set of issues around technology and equity also emerged in the data for this study. Those who raised this issue varied as to whether they saw technology as a potential source of increased or decreased equity; not surprisingly, much of this variation lies in how technology itself is provided as a resource and used in the educational process.

**Outcomes**

The shift in educational policy discussions in recent years toward a focus on outcomes, and, to some extent, away from inputs, has had a substantial impact on conceptions of equity. There was an overall consensus among those with influence that outcomes are an important consideration for an equitable system, despite some disagreement over what measures to use or what it would mean to have equitable outcomes. However, there was variation in what this meant more concretely. Influentials comments reflected three perspectives about what it means to have equitable outcomes: equity as equal outcomes, equity as meeting a threshold, and equity as making progress. Although these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, they do suggest somewhat different ideas about the nature of an equitable system.

**Equity of outcomes as equal outcomes.** Those who argued for equal outcomes frequently cited the idea of closing achievement gaps on achievement tests between subgroups, primarily those identified under NCLB, as of the utmost importance. This approach is consistent with Democratic Liberal ideas (Guiton & Oakes, 1995). Others talked more broadly about the nature of critical outcomes, and the challenge of finding appropriate ones, such as a representative of the CCSSO, who said in an interview,

> We have some indicators of what students are doing after high school as indicators of success of the system, but I don’t think we’ve figured out how we should measure our success yet. I think that’s one big problem in the education field is that the goal posts are always moving. (personal communication, January 4, 2012)

There was also a general emphasis that outcomes, regardless of the measure, should not be “predictable by the zip code or race of the kids in the school. It’s that simple” (Education Trust,
A broad range of groups and individuals voiced the need to place outcomes as central to the equity discussion, including Achieve, AFT, CAP, CEP, CCSSO, TFA, the U.S. Department of Education, Joel Klein, and Linda Darling-Hammond.

Mixed in with this discussion, especially among those who emphasized issues related to an “opportunity to learn,” was concern that the focus on outcomes (especially test scores) had become so strong that the policy debate was losing sight of whether policy decisions were leading to students having the opportunity to reach the desired outcomes. A representative of the AFT captured this sentiment when she said, “We can’t achieve the gains on the outputs, and closing the achievement gap is absolutely a target, but we’re not going to make progress there without looking at the inputs” (personal communication, November 29, 2011).

Although there was substantial support for the importance of closing achievement gap as an equity problem, it was not unchallenged. For example, Hess of AEI argued that the focus on struggling students detracted from attention to other students, especially gifted and advanced students. According to Hess (2011), “achievement-gap mania” has forced educators to quietly but systematically shortchange some students in the rush to serve others” (p. 116).

**Equity of outcomes as meeting a threshold.** Consistent with Gutmann’s (1987) discussion of the need for all students to be able to meet a threshold for participating in the political process, those interviewed often discussed a focus on equal outcomes in concert with the idea that equitable outcomes would reflect students meeting thresholds of achievement or attainment. Thresholds included students completing high school “college or career ready,” meeting proficiency on achievement tests, and being generally “on grade level.”

**Equity of outcomes as student progress.** Although equal outcomes were at the core of equity for many of those with influence, this particular goal was not universally shared. In between a Liberal and Libertarian position, some focused on equitable outcomes as ones that demonstrated progress for all students. This perspective was captured by a representative of Fordham, who said that an equitable system

> does not guarantee that individuals are going to make the most of these opportunities, or that groups are going to come out even as a result of their use of these opportunities. . . . There would be indicators on the value-added side, probably more than on the equal outcome side, because schools attended by poor and disadvantaged and minority kids ought to be, if they’re any good, ought to be making gains that are equivalent to the gains made by schools attended by middle-class white kids. (personal communication, November 16, 2011).

Respondents mentioned measurable outcomes, from scores on achievement tests to attainment in higher education, most often. Those studied also identified less quantifiable outcomes as important in an equitable system. For example, Wendy Kopp of TFA talked of the need for students to leave school with a “love of learning,” “the highest levels of critical thinking,” and “perseverance in working towards academic excellence” (“Eight Questions,” 2010).

**Equity and Quality, or Equity versus Quality?**

One of the ongoing tensions in discussions of educational equity is whether focusing on equity is a necessary foundation for broad-based quality in public education. For those with influence,
the idea that raising equity and enhancing quality are closely connected was by far the dominant perspective. However, scholars from AEI and Fordham both raised questions about this assumption. The most strongly worded example of this perspective came from an AEI scholar, who said in a personal communication,

While I certainly will pledge allegiance to equity, like everybody else will, I also believe that it was our obsession with equity that got us into the quality problem we got into by 1980. There's a bit of a tradeoff here. There's the old John Gardner question, can we be equal and excellent, too? And, we all pledge allegiance to the statement that yes, of course we can be. But, in reality, there are tradeoffs here. (personal communication, November 17, 2011).

Although certainly a controversial statement, this quote raises an important issue about perspectives around the relationship between quality and equity, and it highlights the tension that some see between a focus on equity and one on quality.

CONCLUSION

Across those with influence, this analysis suggests that on the issue of equity, there is real and meaningful common ground. With the exception, to some extent, of those from AEI and the Fordham Institute, most influential individuals studied here have similar views in many areas, including shared beliefs about who has been treated inequitably in the past. Based on ideology, many of those studied fall into the “Democratic Liberal” category (Guitón & Oakes, 1995). However, one critical difference among these groups that share much common ground is in the area of educational processes and structural change—specifically, in terms of the role of market-oriented reforms as mechanisms for enhancing equity. Many past discussions of equity do not provide clear categories for this variation. As well, there are a substantial number of influential organizations and individuals that are both supporting structural change and talking seriously about working within existing structures.

A second critical difference involves the role of outside influences such as concentrated poverty—and thus policy debates beyond education—in the provision of equitable education. However, it is not necessarily the case that those who advocate a “no excuses” approach are arguing that outside influences are irrelevant, or that those who argue for the need to attend to such influences believe that they negate a constructive role for schools.

Equity is a complex and contested idea, and the ways in which those with influence define it tie in closely to the prescriptions they offer for educational reform. What this analysis demonstrates, however, is that many of those with influence place equity at the center of both their understanding of problems in public education and the reforms they advocate.

AUTHOR BIO

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CONCEPTIONS OF EQUITY


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