

Equality and Equity in Educational Systems: A Universal Problem

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In his shrewd article on ATD and equity in the education of gifted pupils Gagné (2011) sets before us a problem that has devastating proportions and consequences for education systems around the world. I wish to concentrate my analysis on this aspect of his article, to conclude with a final comment on the implementation of the talent development model precisely in relationship with equity.

The thesis upheld by Professor Gagné is that the “equity issue is not specific to gifted programs in the USA” (p. 3) and that one cannot consider “the equity issue a phenomenon almost endemic or circumscribed to gifted education” which I believe to be completely true. But the fact that the lack of equity is present in other fields does not make it any less serious that phenomena of this type occur in our sphere. It does not seem to me reasonable, however, that the author affirms that the lack of representation of specific groups, especially ethnic groups, in other fields of human activity or sports, does not lead anybody to accuse them of lack of equity, and from this it is deduced – if I have understood correctly – that the lack of equity in dealing with gifted students has little justification.

My thesis is that the problem of equity is universal and seriously affects, above all, people who are most disfavoured economically, culturally and socially. And furthermore, that the pretended solution of favouring equality which is applied in many education systems only leads to greater inequity.

How is equity understood in the education system? The example below clearly illustrates the problem. The PISA 2006 results from the Spanish Institute of Evaluation (Instituto de Evaluación, 2006) points out the following:

A measure of dispersion is offered by the difference in points between the pupils situated in the percentile (95) and those situated in the percentile (5). If this criterion is used (...), it can be observed that Spain (295) has a low dispersion, fourteen points above that of Finland (281) and considerably lower than that of the OECD Average (311) and that of the OECD Total (339). This result demonstrates that the Spanish education system is comparatively one of those that offers greater equity to its pupils. (p. 44)

Nothing could be more erroneous. I agree with Gaviria when he points out in this respect that:

With regard to the term “equity” used to refer to standard deviation, we can say that not only is it a linguistically inappropriate use of the term, but that moreover it conveys an inadequate ideological load for the expression of the results. Whilst “standard deviation” is a morally neutral technical term, “equity” is a moral condition. The “normal” interpretation, according to this, would be that a smaller standard deviation of results is associated with greater equity, and, contrarily, a greater dispersion of the data would indicate less equity. Naturally, this denotes that the first situation is fairer than the second, which implies in turn that the correct political action should lead to an approach to the second situation and a distancing from the first (...).

Equality understood as homogeneity of results cannot become an objective of educational policy. Homogeneity in itself is not desirable, unless it is accompanied by very high mean results. That should be an objective of political action, to achieve the maximum performance of each and every one of the pupils. (Gaviria, 2003, p. 57–58)

Understood as such, it can clearly be appreciated that equity has little relationship with equality, especially of results, as I will point out below.

It was not in vain that Aristotle (*The Politics*, 1280a) said "Justice is thought to be, and is, equality – not however, for all, but only for equals. And inequality is thought to be, and is, justice; neither is this for all, but only for unequals" (Aristotle, 1991, p. 63). Expressed in other terms, it is not fair to treat unequals equally, nor to treat equals unequally.

Furthermore, as Terceiro (1996) points out, with undeniable relevance for the argument we are maintaining:

John Stuart Mill distinguished, more than one hundred years ago, between two types of equality: *ex ante* and *ex post*. For Mill *ex ante* equality coincides with the idea of equality of opportunities: everybody should begin in the same conditions. *Ex post* equality is equivalent to equality of results: everybody should finish in the same conditions. Mill said that to insist upon *ex post* equality would represent the end of economic and social development.

This obviously means that, if we speak of equality in relationship with schools, it must be in access, but never in results, precisely because not all pupils have the same ability and, therefore, their results can never be the same, but different.

Educational systems, and not only programmes for the most gifted (these also), should guarantee *ex ante* equality or equality of opportunities, which would mean allowing access to an adequate education for every pupil. Adequate with regards to their personal conditions, their abilities and talents.

But to seek equality of results is to snatch every opportunity from those most able to progress in accordance with their personal conditions, which is typical of an egalitarian school that groups the pupils according to their age and not their ability.

"The good school, as I have suggested, does not diminish individual differences; it increases them. It raises the mean and increases the variance" (Eisner, 1999, p. 660).

It is necessary to distance schools from ideological trends that bear little relationship with the genuine sense of education understood as the fostering of the full intellectual and moral development of individuals. And, of course, it is necessary to dissolve the claimed opposition between excellence and equity (see on this the seminal paper from Benbow and Stanley, 1996).

We need to reclaim from the "old pedagogy" the differential treatment of pupils, making our schools more adaptive and concentrating more on the abilities of the scholars than on their age, avoiding offering the same curriculum at the same time to all. It is necessary for schools to

concentrate on the individualisation of teaching and, therefore, of learning, promoting excellence, which in no way opposes equity; on the contrary, equity demands its promotion.

This amounts to facilitating the necessary educational resources that allow each pupil to go as far, as fast, as extensively and in such depth as his or her ability and competence allow. This is understanding the principle of equality of opportunities in its correct meaning. A school – and an education system – that do not tend to be as adaptive as possible cannot guarantee this striving towards excellence (cf. Tourón, 2010).

It is necessary to provide to all children good opportunities to learn and fully develop their human potential. This is coherent with the true meaning of education, which entails being sensitive to individual differences and acting accordingly. Equality should be understood as equal access to an appropriate education. Thus, not establishing or eliminating valid programmes for students with an exceptional ability, or a specific talent in any field, should be considered just as erroneous as eliminating programmes for students with learning difficulties. It is necessary for society to be concerned about all individuals and groups in order to thus respond to their diversity and, therefore, to the wealth that this conveys.

In view of that, it is possible to conclude that the problem of equity is not only present in access to programmes for gifted children, but that it affects the education system as a whole and, therefore, becomes a universal problem, with greater consequences for those who find themselves deprived of an adequate education: whether this is due to a family, cultural, or economic deficit, their ethnic group or any other cause that implies a lack of equity.

On the other hand, and to end these reflections, I understand that the considerations by Professor Gagné regarding the implementation of his perfectly valid and they should be taken into account, not only in the development of programmes for gifted children, but to achieve a more adaptive school that reach pupils. It is time to change from the education of the gifted to a gifted education for all.

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