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## Equality of Opportunity in Education: Is It Really Fair?\*

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to discuss what equality of opportunity statement in education means in today's world and analyse reflections of this on education processes. In accordance with this purpose, notion of "equality of opportunity in education" will be discussed over philosophic and political literature and it will be evaluated from the point of justice theories. At first, the historical conditions in which equality of opportunity thought has derived will be examined and then current discussions will be evaluated. From the current discussions, deficiencies of equality of opportunity thought in terms of social and economic conditions within today's world will be determined and it will be put forward that the notion should be re-discussed in terms of justice and human rights. Finally, the need of re-defining of opportunity equality in education notion will be emphasized and conditions of providing a fair equality will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Social inequality, equality of opportunity, educational justice, social justice.

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### **Introduction**

The discourse of equality in opportunity, which establishes the basis of the modern society and modern educational institutions, appeared at the same time with the emergence of nation states. The modern state, which tries to abolish inequalities and injustice -even in a relativistic way- before its introduction, used equality before the law and voting power as two basic arguments by using the nation and citizenship ideas. The idea of equality in opportunity also gained importance as a concept which frames those arguments. In short, the concept which we can define as the equality of reaching the resources and benefiting from them, claims that it can eliminate inequalities between citizens by education. In this context, it provides the basis for free public education.

This model, which is built on the benefit of all children from similar education programs in similar schools, aims to create both a common citizenship consciousness and a common knowledge system and accumulation. The emphasis on the people who become successful in that system could reach the place they deserve according to their ability and potentially extended the belief for the defense of equality and justice of the modern state. According to this; anyone who wishes now will be able to take important responsibilities and duties in society according to the merit principle, regardless of their class origin and socio-economic conditions.

Although it has such a strong promise, this discourse is quite insufficient especially in terms of resolving today's inequalities and providing fairness. Today's globalizing neoliberal conditions are major threats to the public education right of the citizens. In Turkey, as in many other parts of the world, especially the field of education is under brutal neoliberal attacks. The continuing drop in the budget allocated to public schools, the rise in the quality difference between public schools concerning their type and region, the encouragement of private schools, the injustices arising from examination systems make the debate on the

equality of opportunity in education more and more important every day. Because the definition of equality and the uncertainty about what the opportunities include -which is actually a product of a political determination- raises the question of what is fair.

The purpose of this study is to question these inadequacies and uncertainties and to rethink the justice left in the shadow of equality discourse. In this context, the study will examine how the inequality is reproduced and legitimized under the discourse of equality, then the conflict between equality and justice will be mentioned, and the consequences of this in the educational atmosphere will be emphasized.

### **Inequalities Which Emerge From Equality Discourse**

The reasons and sources of both inequality and the idea of equality are defined differently in the social and economic reality of each period; in this context, the question of “what is fair” has gained a relative form. However, the most accurate and realistic perusal of the inequality debate is the platform which takes the class character as a basis. Ancient philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle described the fair as “giving everyone what they deserve”. The right is interpreted as the equal distribution of prizes or penalties to those who are equal. Thus, equality and equity are considered mutually. But in the slave society where these two thinkers live, equality exists only in the context of free male citizens. In addition, in feudal society, equality is not understood as the equality between social classes, but the equality of the aristocratic class and serfs among themselves. Therefore, for slave and feudal societies, what is fair is shaped within the framework of equality definitions required by class roles and functions. Similarly, in modern capitalist societies, the definition and content of equality are directly related to the mode of production. Although the emphasis on social equality is constantly on the agenda, what really matters is the in-class equality. It is not possible for this idealized equality to provide true justice.

When we think in terms of historical and social essentiality; the modern liberal society has removed some of the inequalities of the feudal period to some degree. Because, the traditional submission habits of the feudal period were

weakened by the influence of the market economy and secular ideology, and a new ground of legitimation was necessitated. Thus, citizenship has become a key force in the process of stabilizing and legitimizing nation-states. In order to assure citizenship, a new social integration platform was needed, and this emerged as the right to general vote (Bowles & Gintis, 1987). This right, of course, came with the participation in administration, citizenship rights, and equality before the law. Therefore, in principle, equality in conditions and opportunities for everyone is ensured.

This kind of equality, which can be regarded as the legacy of American and French Revolutions, in particular, argues that the administrative and professional positions in society should be given to talented individuals regardless of their social origins. Thus, the right to enter social institutions is made dependent on success and ability and is recognized to everyone (Turner, 1997). However, the equalization of opportunities depends primarily on equalization of education. Because, in order to open all the professional fields to the competition of everyone, potentials and abilities need to be revealed at an equal level. For this reason, one of the most important bases of liberal society is the defense of “equality of opportunity in education”, and the education that takes place within this framework is the first step of the professional rise and social status. The fact that education has become a public service and has been equal and free for all citizens to a certain extent has paved the way for gaining skills and citizenship awareness through general education. In addition, a society which intelligence, skill, and ability take the place of family and class origin, was idealized. This has led to the emergence of the “meritocracy” which has an important place in modern social theory.

The meritocracy grounds on universal success criteria and merit in the profession choices instead of personal status, such as social status, age, gender. In this way, it is assumed that social mobility is facilitated and arbitrariness is eliminated to some degree. However, this formal relationship between equality and merit also constitutes the basic conflict of justice. Because accepting people as unconditionally equal means ignoring the differences between them. People who do not have merit because of their lack of knowledge, intelligence, talent or

health are in this case, treated unrighteously (Solomon, 2004). Similarly, it could not be told that true justice is provided for individuals who do not have equal social and class conditions, even if they have equal education opportunities. Thus, while equality of opportunity may seem like a universally accepted democratic right, it is seen that there is no effective use of this right. Because even if everyone is brought to the same starting point, it is very clear who will win the race. The main determinant here is the historical, social and class origins (Sandel, 2013).

When we accept that people are not equal in terms of social origin, natural ability, and health conditions, we come to the point that the meritocratic approach violates equality rather than providing equality. Thus, in a capitalist society with theoretical equality of opportunity, it can be said that opportunities are far from equal in practice. If we liken capitalist society to a contest based on the competitiveness of talents, there is an unequal society from the very beginning. Because in an open competition, not everyone has the chance to win the race (Turner, 1997). In this context, there is a great gap between the legal status of the “legitimate citizen” and the practical ability of “actual citizen” (Bauman, 2013: 21). It is not possible for individuals to overcome this gap with their own personal resources and skills.

Therefore, capitalism and democratic egalitarianism are not complementary systems as it is said. While the former one is characterized by economic privileges at the forefront of property rights, the latter one is giving priority to the freedom that arises on the basis of the use of individual rights. From this point of view, democratic institutions function as legitimations in advanced capitalist countries, but democratic rules do not work very much in places such as family, school, workplace where life actually takes place (Bowles & Gintis, 1987). Therefore, democratic modern states have become one of the historical frameworks that create class inequality at the same time, even though they equalize and integrate people at the national level (Bauman, 2013). Hence, a totally egalitarian society is impossible in the modern market economy. And, the argument of modern society, which is based on merit only, will bring democracy and prosperity to everyone is insubstantial.

For this reason, schools that are part of the liberal society have also turned into institutions that reproduce social inequality and systematically resuming power distribution in society. According to this view, which Bourdieu calls as the “theory of reproduction”, the educational system, rather than liberating people, confine them to the conditions in which they exist and hinders social mobility (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Because the deprivation of children in the society is reproduced in the classroom environment and the school creates sub-cultures within itself. Thus, students' achievements are not the result of intelligence or talent, but of social arrangements in the classroom and school (Turner, 1997).

The fact that the first education taken in the family depends on social origin constitutes a close connection between the course of individual life and the social position. For example, children from educated upper-class families have more opportunities and motivation to become successful. Because culture in their daily life and the culture of the school is close to each other and supporting each other. The values of the social class they come from are reproduced in school and in a sense they secure their social status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Lareau, 2011). Moreover, since the upper classes are exempt from the fundamental existential concerns that determine life, they are more ambitious about acquiring directly non-vital interests and skills (Idemen, 2012). This freedom is reflected in the choices of education. In particular, there is an important link between selected fields in the university education and social origins, and professional concerns for the future in these choices are not very decisive for the upper classes.

Although the disadvantaged groups have the same level of intelligence and ability, they have often a lower level of success. This is due to both social origins and lack of physical conditions. The inadequacy of support from parents and cultural environment reduces education motivation, and poor housing and nutrition conditions affect the level of success negatively (Turner, 1997). In addition, an education that lasts up to a university degree requires great investment and sacrifice for the disadvantaged. Thus, poor children who are academically successful are less likely to graduate from university than wealthy children who fail (Stiglitz, 2015: 67). Therefore, while the university experience for children from a privileged social class is an ordinary life perspective,

awareness of the objective obstacles for the disadvantaged classes causes them to exclude themselves from this process. Moreover, most of these children do not realize that a social exclusion mechanism is operating here, and it seeks responsibility for its failure (Idemen, 2012). Thus they also play a direct role in the reproduction of class culture (Willis, 2016). In fact, as Bourdieu and Passeron say (1990), this is symbolic violence that replaces physical coercion. The question is to impose and disseminate social hierarchy in an authoritarian way to the whole society through education.

The discourse of opportunity equality, one of the tools of this symbolic violence, legitimizes existing inequalities by telling people that they are responsible for their own failures, not society. Therefore, the individual is forced to undertake socially structured roles, without realizing the inequality is caused by social contradictions. He/she accepts and maintains these roles as his/her own “badges of ability” (Sennett & Cobb, 2017). Thus, the school, which is perhaps the only way to integrate as an equal identity of society for disadvantaged people, is transformed into a place where class differences and roles are re-strengthened. The diplomas also make social status differences more obvious. Therefore, the value of a diploma in the present day, have meaning over the actual “market value of the diploma” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990: 60). The future market value of a student is determined almost from the beginning according to the type of school he/she enrolled.

Inequality and injustice are also clearly recognized at the level of the institutional structure of schools. Although it is claimed that public education takes place under similar conditions for all, class inequalities in the patterns of socialization in schools are further strengthened by the financial resource inequalities devoted to schools. In this context, the program and the functioning of educational institutions that train staff in different jobs and professions are decisive in terms of reflecting both the different class values and the personality traits required by the lower and upper occupations. Thus, education reproduces the attitudes and behaviors that basic groups in the division of labor should have (Bowles, 1977). The physical properties of the areas such as the use of schools, class order, the content and the way of social and cultural activities, and even the

canteen and cafeteria, appear as important indicators and reproduction of inequality.

Thus, education for the division of labor which is given by the liberal state and inequalities which arise from it and slave society of Plato do not differ much. Just as Plato's division of individuals, in "The Republic", into classes such as gold, silver, and iron according to their abilities, and the upper classes receive more rights and prizes (Plato, 2013), a similar process exists in today's meritocratic society. The fractions which are advantageous from the starting point is already highlighted as talented and they are also motivated in the education processes to develop these skills and transform them into social functions. The source of motivation is of course that they will have a privileged place in society and they will get more share from scarce resources (Turner, 1997: 41; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014). The main problem today is already emerging at this point.

Although there is an ideology of equality as the basis of social belonging, and therefore of citizenship, the fact that inequality continues in practice is one of the fundamental conflicts of modern society. In the words of Bauman; we are facing "historical desperation which is determined by the economy" (Bauman, 2017: 46). In this respect, there is a constant tension between the demand for equality expressed in the political process and the inequality cases arising from the market mechanism in capitalist society. While this tension is tried to be closed with the participation of the political process and the right to vote, the rhetoric of equality of opportunity has become a complementary argument. However, under the current neoliberal conditions that we live, by the weakening of social state practices, how the competition and prosperity will be brought together is still an important problem and perhaps a new social contract is needed.

This situation has become a matter of discussion not only in the left literature but also in the liberal political tradition. This led to the emergence of new theories seeking to reconcile liberalism and social economic understanding of wealth. The most prominent of them is Rawls's "theory of justice". According to Rawls, a fair society is a society where the freedom of the person does not conflict with the freedom of others, and the equal fundamental freedoms are maximized (Turner, 1997). However, the current system leads to serious asymmetries in fair

political freedoms area, undermines fair opportunities for education and work, and by permitting an extremely uneven distribution of income and assets harms economic and social equality (Rawls, 2007). Therefore, the distribution of income and welfare arising from the free market with formal equality of opportunity is not fair. The way to removing this injustice is to correct social and economic disadvantages. In this respect, Rawls's theory aims to provide the needs of nutrition, care, and special education, in order to ensure that everyone has an equal starting point regardless of their class and family history (Sandel, 2013).

Thus, Rawls turns justice into a defense of equality for the most disadvantaged in society (Solomon, 2004: 25). This theory, which Rawls describes as “justice as fairness”, is basically based on two principles of justice. In the first of these; it is stated that everyone has an equal right to have equal basic rights and freedoms and that this order is the same for all. The basic rights stated here are freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, and political freedom. In the second one; it is foreseeing that the social and economic conditions should be in a way that would create fair equality of opportunity for all and should be arranged in such a way as to benefit the most disadvantaged members of the society (Rawls, 2007: 51). This principle, which is also called a “difference principle”, tries to improve unequal abilities without blocking the talented and to remove inequalities. It encourages talented people to develop their own abilities but points out that the gains they derive will belong to the whole society (Sandel, 2013: 186). Thus, the concept of equality is defined in terms of needs, not in terms of ability or advantage, and everyone's needs and interests are taken seriously in an equal way. (Solomon, 2004).

The “principle of difference” must be applied to the public principles and policies that govern social and economic inequalities. Thus, the system of rights and benefits is rearranged and the standards and measures used are re-determined (Rawls, 2007: 311). The aim is to achieve equality in results by using legislation and other political means, regardless of the starting point and natural ability. In this respect, initial inequalities are tried to be transformed into social equality (Turner, 1997). This principle is also called the “principle of equality in outcomes”, also constitutes one of the most radical ideas of equality, and

paradoxically, approaches almost socialist policies within the liberal discourse. However, it is, of course, controversial whether it is practical and realistic to focus directly on the equalization of outcomes without a radical transformation in the existing order.

What is particularly interesting here is that the dimensions of inequality and injustice come to the level to be discussed even in the liberal ranks and that the education is seen as unsustainable in this condition. It is because education appears to have given up its responsibility and liability to create a “democracy of citizens”. The discourse of citizenship, based on “general interest”, is losing its significance increasingly. The social division of labor, which began in the early stages of education, is imposed on the individual starting from childhood and hinders their choices for the future. This produces masses that serve the general interest, but cannot get enough of it. This situation, which is embodied by mistrust and unbelief, is critically important for the future of modern society. If the children and young people in question, how long an order which provides no dreams, hope, and optimism about the future can continue?

### **Conclusion**

Whether a society is fair is closely related to how revenues, rights, responsibilities, and duties are distributed. However, when we define this as simply distributing to everyone what they deserve, the conditions and content of the merit may change each time. Therefore, the discussion of equality should include the issue of justice. Although the equality of opportunity approach presents a unifying and homogenizing view in the process of the emergence of the modern state, the inequalities are becoming more evident today. Particularly in today's advanced capitalist societies, significant levels of governance derive their members from private schools. Thus, the idea of equality of opportunity has been transformed into a formal narrative that encompasses only public education and has almost functioned for the equalization of class inequalities in themselves.

What is required today is to exclude the idea of equal opportunity in education -until at least the conditions of real equality become possible- from being a political discourse and a groundless argument and make it practical again.

The priority condition is for this; To remove the helplessness against injustice and distrust in the system. In this context, the most important step is to strengthen the belief that an individual's existing potential can be revealed without depending on the type of educational institution in which he/she is located. Of course, in order to do this, educational policies and institutions must be reformed. The education which is transformed into an elite system must be turned into an egalitarian structure involving all citizens. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to alleviate the deprivation caused by familial and environmental factors by the practices in the educational processes and to convert the existing inequalities as much as possible. This requires, even at a minimum level, class and school environments where each individual can discover and use his or her capacity.

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