

Educational Inequities in Learning Environments: A Critical Analysis

Tek Raj Panthi

panthitekraj769@gmail.com
Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa

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Abstract

This article carefully assesses the conceptual misconceptions inherent in several social and philosophical frameworks on equality of opportunity, especially within educational contexts. These perspectives differ not just in their comprehension of knowledge but also in their assumptions about the known world and human cognition. This research project aims to examine the fallacy of equal educational opportunity by rigorously analyzing how sociological and philosophical perspectives misread and oversimplify concepts of fairness. This narrative review integrates egalitarian theory, basic equality theory, democratic theory, Marxian theory, and structural-functional theory. This methodological approach familiarizes readers with the literature on equality of opportunity, outlines essential ideas, emphasizes theoretical benefits, and pinpoints challenges to implementation. A thorough search for key terms related to educational inequities in learning environments was performed throughout academic databases and philosophical resources. This paper aims to challenge the theory of equal opportunity by critiquing the simplistic approach of constitutionalists who prioritize the overall quality of individuals' lives rather than endorsing the Marxist perspective, which prioritizes protection based on socioeconomic status rather than individual needs. The paper challenges the notion of equal educational opportunity as often simplistic and illusory by examining liberal egalitarian, social democratic, and Marxian approaches, particularly when formal access is conflated with substantive equity. The analysis exposes persistent structural barriers that undermine claims of equality despite policy rhetoric, drawing implications for diverse learning contexts like Nepal. The most effective indicators of achieving real educational equity are still unclear within particular cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts. Most unequal opportunities are likely to remain so because the most effective indicators for addressing them remain unclear within specific contexts and situations.

Keywords: Equality, Educational opportunity, Social democracy, Marxian theory, Structural inequality.

Introduction

The concepts of equality and equal opportunity in educational philosophy and policy are complex and contentious. The conversation on equality and discrimination is quite unclear in terms of ideas and methods (Young, 2001). Philosophical discourse on equal opportunity has elucidated the aspects to be contrasted in the context of equality—resources, welfare, or capabilities—yet the implementation of these concepts remains challenging. Education may improve lives, but tragically, there are still differences in access to education. It is now a good time to get people to act because of the many worldwide issues going on. In modern civilization, we have seen significant geopolitical events with profound consequences for social connections at local, national, and global scales (Aiston et al., 2024).

This theoretical uncertainty is especially important in Nepal, where people from different language, ethnic, and social backgrounds join the school system on very uneven terms. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that everyone is born free and equal in rights and dignity, yet schools nevertheless reveal that there are distinctions (United Nations, 1948). This difference between theory and practice highlights how crucial it is to develop conceptual frameworks that are easy to comprehend.

The recent debates have brought to the forefront the almost trivial question of what parameters we should focus on when making comparisons when judging equality or inequality. The literature articulates the issues better; however, they are not being addressed in the field. There is also the question, which has received minimal attention, of whether we are talking about groups or individuals when we compare the different positions of people in relation to the targets of equality. The articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, A.1 and A.2 state, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” and the rights and freedoms are inalienable and not subject to any form of discrimination. Furthermore, various theories of equality assume that the units or components that we should be evaluating when making judgments about inequality are individuals.

Cupit (2006) distinguishes between teleological arguments for equality, which focus on achieving equitable distribution patterns that mitigate disparities, and non-teleological arguments that emphasize the equal treatment of persons regardless of outcomes. Social democratic philosophy aligns with the former, prioritizing structural equality above individual merit (Odekon, 2015). These opposing methods bring forth important tensions: should equality focus on outcomes or how people are treated? In Nepal, this issue aids in determining whether equality policies address structural disadvantage or merely formal access.

Governments legitimate equality of opportunity through policies addressing voting rights, educational access, economic participation, and anti-discrimination measures. However, deontological theory argues that people ought to be treated as equals irrespective of outcomes (McKerlie, 1996). Even when valuable resources are distributed based on cast, ethnicity, location, or capacity, the rationale behind such allocations remains contested.

This paper introduces two key factors creating the illusion of equal educational opportunity: (1) treating people according to objective valuations rather than equal moral worth, and (2) assuming life chances should not be determined by morally arbitrary factors like social class,

race, or gender (Jencks, 1988). In practice, educational opportunities significantly influence labor market success, democratic citizenship preparation, and human flourishing, yet the precise meaning of equality of educational opportunity remains subject to substantial disagreement. This research analyzes the illusion of equal educational opportunity by critically examining how sociological and philosophical perspectives misunderstand and oversimplify equity challenges. The research gap lies in insufficient exploration of how theoretical frameworks fail to address context-specific barriers in diverse educational settings.

Educational equity, along with equal public concern and resource allocation, which would affect authoritarian outcome in labor market attainment, democratic citizenship, and overall human success, and, more importantly, that people's life opportunities should not be determined by such morally arbitrary circumstances of birth as social origin, race, or sex, is broadly agreed upon. However, there is broad disagreement on the more precise implications of the ideal of equality of educational opportunity (see Jencks 1988). This paper attempts to outline the main contours of such disagreements.

The different sociological and philosophical views on the critique of the opportunity of equality and the misunderstanding and assumptions of the views and the critique of simplistic forms of the critique of equality of opportunity provide valuable insights into the various facets of the critique of the opportunity of equality as a form of illusion. There is a research gap in how different sociological and philosophical views critique the opportunity of equality and oversimplify the misunderstanding of the opportunity of equality.

Liberal Egalitarianism

An equal moral standing claims the same weight for all humans (Kymlicka, 2002). When the cultural context is democracy, and the cultural values remind the people of democracy, Walzer (1983) contended that democratic egalitarianism becomes the justice of the people. Even though liberal egalitarianism champions the individual over the collective, it is a loose coalition of competing schools of thought. Some instrumental egalitarians view equality as a pathway, while non-instrumentalist egalitarians cherish equality as an end in itself (Arneson, 2013). The natural moral rights (Locke, 1690) and the Scanlon (1998) version of contractualism, which states that every reasonable person will come to a consensus, add an extra dimension to the scholarship of justice.

Basic Equality

The concept of basic equality states that every person should be assigned the same value, and thus, should be afforded every equal right, and should receive equal attention. Equal consideration and respect should be given to all (Mulderig, 2018). The United Nations (1948) states this is the fundamental premise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, pivotal inhumanity is fundamental equality itself, and is directed to the inhumane absence of basic living, civil, and educational rights (Baker et al., 2006). The moral bottom line is fundamental equality. Educational inequality, particularly in Nepal, calls for initiatives that extend beyond non-discrimination to include the redistribution of available resources and boosting available capacities.

Theoretical Perspectives on Equality of Opportunity: Social Democracy

Odekon (2015) explained that socialist democracy promotes equal opportunity type policies, and encourages treating everyone equally and with the same value. Democracy does not permit discrimination, and democracy provides equal social and economic rights regardless of sex, race, nationality, or economic class. Laws granting free public education (and not private education) enable people to advance socially based on their individual abilities and not their family's financial resources.

Marxian Perspective

Marx viewed liberalism's advocacy of equality as designed to hide prejudice and discrimination based on the class system. True equality, according to him, is the absence of private ownership of the means of production, and in doing so, he eliminates class differences, and thereby achieves equal employment opportunities and equal pay for the work done (Katl, 2013). The Marxian analysis of a society illustrates that meritocracy is a euphemism for the privileged social and economic status of the dominant class. In Nepal, the existence of dual school systems (public and private) provides a classic illustration of theoretical Marxian ideology in that socially and politically dominant classes obtain unequal and, in this case, superior educational resources, regardless of policies that support formal equality.

Methods

This narrative review incorporates aspects of liberal theory, theories of fundamental equality and democracy, Marxian theory, and structural functionalism. A broad search of academic and philosophical databases was conducted for terms associated with 'illusion of equality of opportunity.' Identifying and examining recurring conceptual tensions (e.g., formal versus substantive equality, merit versus structural barriers, and access versus attainment) facilitated thematic development. A comparative analysis of the theories led to the conclusions drawn. Such rigor and depth in this review gives the reader an understanding of the literature on the equality of opportunity, clarifies the theories, presents the benefits of the theories, and identifies the challenges of the theories.

Results and Discussion

Three themes emerged through comparative analysis of theoretical literature: (1) formal vs. substantive opportunity definitions, (2) meritocracy's embedded inequalities, and (3) structural reproduction mechanisms. These were derived by grouping recurring conceptual tensions across egalitarian, democratic, and Marxian frameworks.

Opportunity and Education

Westen (1985) defines opportunity as a relationship between agents, goals, and permissible obstacles. Equal educational opportunity exists when relevant groups face only legitimate obstacles (examinations) rather than irrelevant ones (discrimination). However, defining "relevant" obstacles proves contentious. For example, Dalit students face both legitimate

academic requirements and illegitimate geographic/language barriers, compromising formal equality claims. There are various forms of social inequality, one of which is educational inequality, and efforts to reduce educational inequality are also efforts to reduce social inequality in its other forms. Bernstein said, "Education can't make up for society, but schools that want to be "incubators of democracy" have a moral duty to try" (Reay, D. 2011).

In order to apply such a concept to a situation in the realm of education, we must grapple with questions of who the suitable actors are, what the right objective is, and what the rest of the 'legitimate' hurdles are. Take, for example, admissions to a very selective university; if we see the educational institution of a particular region or country as the actor, it will have to keep a very specific set of criteria, like an entrance examination, a certain level of academic English, a fulfillment of the financial requirement, and so on. There is a goal for which such obstacles should hold. In such a situation, we would like to think that it would not be a hindrance to the goal to be an applicant of a particular color, gender, or religion. When the eligible group has only the relevant hurdles pertaining to the desired objective, we can assert that there exists equal opportunity among members of that group. Consider the instance where student A is from a Dalit background and student B is from an elite background. If there are no other variables, passing the entrance exam is the only hurdle for them to have equal opportunity to gain admission to a particular university. This unequal opportunity problem also applies to a Dalit student who confronts an arbitrary additional barrier such as racial discrimination, which a B student does not face.

Education act and equal opportunity

Formal equality of opportunity states that rules and regulations that reference personal attributes should not stand in the way of one achieving their goals. These personal attributes include race, social-economic class, sex, religion, and sexual orientation. With respect to discrimination in education, formal equality of opportunity is concerned with the elimination of legal barriers or criteria for the admission of students into educational institutions that are discriminatory in nature. While some people claim that formal equality of opportunity is the only standard that it is possible to have in the allocation of educational resources, most political and moral philosophers, in this case, hold the view that it is necessary while insufficient.

The equality principle states that no one should be unfairly discriminated against. It means that the state is free to determine the extent and mechanisms, and how the educational resources are to be allocated, if at all, that are required to educate. Having no, or insufficient educational materials, teachers, and school buildings among other resources means that education cannot be provided. With some children not receiving an education, is promising does not effectively provide equality of opportunity Marx referred to.

From Marx's perspective, the equal educational opportunities that should theoretically exist are not really opportunities at all, as there are barriers such as informal social discrimination and private prejudice that really limit the educational opportunities available to a given child. This is particularly relevant to the exclusion of children from schools. Nepal is a diverse country with

people from different geographic and ecological regions, as well as diverse social, economic, cultural, religious, and linguistic groups and sub-groups. A school represents a small society. Meaning that the school acts as a social shadow zone, and thus, a social race zone shadowed society. Anderson (2010) argues unable to achieve this.

Educational Opportunity and Merit basis

The presumption is meritocratic. In principle, educational advantages ought to be allocated based on individual merit. In education, merit is typically understood to be entrance criteria, scores on ability tests, or grades in some examinations. This has some constraints especially regarding the child's social context. If educational chances are to be allocated to those who have the greatest merit, i.e., the highest scores in the admission examinations, we, however, fail to recognize that merit is endogenous to education, that is, the very opportunity to be educated generates merit (Satz 2007). The shortcoming of meritocratic equality of opportunity first, whether it should be measured based on test scores and take into consideration moral dimensions, such as the ability to work harmoniously with others, and second, that while conditioning educational opportunities on "merit" may seem reasonable in dealing with adults, it is quite problematic with very young children. As Michael Walzer (1983) points out, a reading teacher's job is to teach children to read, and not to just provide the opportunity to learn to read.

Analyzing educational theory, even children not perceived as 'worthy', may still merit the attention of educators. Possibly, this explains the criticism of early educational 'tracking' by ability. Some 'tracking' of children may not be harmless (Satz 2007). In the 2011 census, Nepal reported 80.6% of the population as Hindus, 10.7% as Buddhists with a rich variety of spoken and written languages (CBS, 2012). SDG 4 stipulates education as a fundamental human right and should be made available to everyone without exclusion (UNESCO, 2015). Although empirical structural-functional theory (in education) affirmatively responds to the question of whether 'merit' legitimizes distribution, a Marxian approach identifies the phenomenon of class reproduction through

Equity and Educational Opportunity

In the context of limits of formal equality of opportunity, Rawls develops a conception, and is called fair equality of opportunity, that requires social workplaces and positions be formally open to all, and that individuals who are similarly talented and motivated should have a roughly equal chance to attain these positions, independent of their social class background (Rawls, 2001). Assuming that in every society, all members are to be treated as relevant actors, all work and positions are to be targeted as ends, and there are no hindrances to be faced such as an individual's social class background.

In the context of education, this justified reasoning may advocate for policies that bridge the educational attainment gap between the economically disadvantaged and the economically advantaged, assuming that these students can be recognized. This would mean that these students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds should be held to the same standards as their economically advantaged peers who possess the same potential. The Rawlsian framing of

fair equality of opportunity seeks to remove social class and background as determinants of educational attainment. Therefore, fair equality of opportunity presents the most radical perspective on the extent of educational opportunity that one can claim.

Discussions about finishing lines in equality of opportunity can be traced on two fronts: one is the differing objectives and the measurement of equality, and the other is the equal opportunity in education which can be realized when everyone of comparable ability achieves the same outcome. The first issue has to be addressed in the setting of the differing goals. People are born different in terms of their caste, religion, geographical area, their gender, and the socio-economic class. Hence the dominant function of the state is to design policies that are responsive to the individual circumstances and the conditions of the person.

Liberal democracy theory has advocated to the issues of equality of opportunity in terms of diverse goals and he find out that the ultimate goals of state is to promote the common good where this is conceived of as promoting the moral, intellectual, and active traits of its citizens as well as all social institution and resources are also used to promote the common good (Stuart, 2007).

The new query can be restructured as, can equal opportunity in goods and services be achieved in a situation where people with comparable talents achieve identical outcomes and all investments are equal? Also, when people with equal natural gifts are provided identical opportunities? Answers to these two questions assist philosophers positing a conception of the equality of opportunity. Rawls worked on the critique of the political theory of utilitarianism and contrary to the majority position that social policy's principal aim is the maximization of social welfare, he 'first' opposed the aggregative nature of the theory which is indifferent to the outcomes' distribution and the second rest on the theory ignoring the person's state which calls for a normative intervention. Rawls (2009) remarks that the measure of equality or measure of welfare is powerful, but the fusion of equality and welfare via primary goods is weak, he suggested, "equality of opportunity for welfare" as opposed to a normative focus.

In Sen (1980), Sen also wrote about the equality of opportunity and the title of the capability does not have either welfare nor does it have any rate or welfare by it self, he is saying people should have the equality of opportunities for \to achieve what? This view brought attention to the condition of people or of the person and his thinking was beyond Rawls and Mills thinking of the equality of opportunity for welfare and individual pleasure for person respectively.. Among the philosophical controversies, some of these controversies are interlaced with other contending values, such as those of family and of diversity: What do parental / family rights entail, with respect to the search for the equal opportunity? Is normative positive prescription needed for or against to obtain equal opportunity? This view is rejected by the Marxists because it results in the process not being equal (Katál, 2013). From the meta-analysis, it can be noted that equality does not signify the social protection of everyone's equal need and the equal protection from social stratum of the people, but rather all people of the society must be given equal opportunities to access different social and economic levels and to integrate into the means of production and to also have equal opportunities to promote the capability of the individual. Thus, the notion of equality of opportunity continues to exist as an illusion.

Discussion

This article attempts to the study of the illusion of equality in Nepalese education by analyzing the basic education system through a number of lenses: the Marxist conflict theory, the democratic/structural–functional theory and democratic theory. According to the national census of 2011, Nepal has around 80.6% Hindu, 10.7% Buddhist and the remaining population include Muslims, Kirat, Christians, Jains and others. This diversity implies that children come to school with varied languages, cultures and different learning requirements. Thus, educational opportunities must not only ensure school access, but must also be culturally and linguistically relevant to the children.

From an egalitarian perspective, equality in education is grounded in the idea that all individuals hold equal human worth and should therefore receive equal opportunities. This notion closely aligns with human rights principles. However, egalitarian theory fails to account for deeper structural inequalities created by differences in family background, parental education levels, home resources, and social environment. Even when access is guaranteed, these hidden variables significantly affect children’s ability to participate and achieve in school, revealing the limits of equality understood merely as equal access.

In opposition to this view, structural-functionalism, particularly Parsons, regards schools as ‘miniature societies’ and argues that opportunities should be allocated on the basis of merit, ability, and accomplishment, not social origin. From this view, it is legitimized to have standard procedures, such as entrance tests, promotions and rewards based on performance, etc. This theory aims to reduce the inequalities stemming from the natural ability and supportive environment by positing that the environment is contending, but fails to recognize the inequalities that emanate from the socioeconomic class. For instance, even if there is equal opportunity, a child from a relatively higher social class is likely to do better in Nepal because he/she has better language skills, more learning materials, and a more supportive home and guidance.

Nepal’s education policy, like those that follow the UNESCO 2030 Agenda, stress fair and inclusive education. The School Sector Development Plan (SSDP) says again that we need to close the gaps in access and learning outcomes. From a Marxian conflict viewpoint, these innovations do not challenge the class-oriented framework of education. Marxists contend that the privileged sustain their supremacy by gaining entry to superior educational institutions, so ensuring elevated success levels and obtaining lucrative employment. This tendency may be seen in the enormous difference between Nepal’s private and public schools. Students at private schools have more resources, better English skills, and better places to study, which leads to consistently superior academic performance than students in public schools.

Marx also argues that merit-based systems obscure structural inequality. Policies like cost-recovery in higher education make it less likely that people from lower-income groups would participate, which social inequality keeps going. Bowles and Gintis contend that education perpetuates social hierarchies via the reproduction of attitudes, behaviours, and class differences. Nepal has made changes, such giving out free textbooks, scholarships, mid-day

lunches, and initiatives to get people involved in their communities, but there is still inequality. 8.7% of students aged 5–12 were not enrolled in school in 2017, and the basic education completion rate was only 70.1%. These numbers show that it is still hard to make sure that everyone gets the same educational results. In general, the situation in Nepal shows that no one theory can fully explain or fix the problem of unequal education. Instead, to fix differences in opportunities and success in a varied society, we need a mix of different academic points of view.

Conclusion

Formal equality is a necessary but inadequate prerequisite for educational equity. Marxian analysis uncovers processes of class reproduction, while Rawlsian fair equality provides substantive criteria without confronting more profound structural impediments. Nepal's history shows that equal opportunity is still a dream if resource gaps, language differences, and class differences are not addressed. Policy has to go beyond just making things available to everyone. It needs to make sure that everyone has the same access to resources, power, and learning opportunities. Only a complete overhaul of the system can turn talk of equality into real educational parity.

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