

Impact of Socio-economic Factors on the Perception of Equality of Opportunity

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Abstract

This article examines the various sociological and philosophical perspectives on equality of opportunity, focusing on areas of misunderstanding within these viewpoints. It aims to critically analyze these perspectives, highlighting the underlying assumptions and challenging simplistic approaches to the concept of equal opportunity. The article claims that these perspectives differ in knowledge, beliefs about the familiar world, and human comprehension. By critiquing the constitutionalist approach, which prioritizes overall quality of life, and contrasting it with the Marxist perspective, which emphasizes protection based on socioeconomic status, this essay challenges conventional notions of equal opportunity. It advocates for a perspective rooted in fundamental equality and social democratic philosophy, arguing against discrimination based on sex, gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. The article posits that we should regard all individuals as equally valuable human beings. Furthermore, this study contends that the perception of equal opportunity remains misleading, as the most effective criteria for achieving it remain unresolved in specific contexts and situations. By examining these complexities, the article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of equality of opportunity in contemporary society.

Key words: Equality, Opportunity, Perception, Socioeconomic

Introduction

Equality and equal opportunity are complex concepts that have sparked considerable debate regarding their meanings and justifications. Discussions on equality and discrimination are often characterized by significant conceptual and methodological confusion. Philosophical debates on equality of opportunity have primarily focused on what the aim should be when striving to make people more equal (Young, 2001). Cupit (2006) defines equality using two

terms: teleological arguments for equality and non-teleological arguments for equality. The teleological approach focuses on achieving an overall pattern of distribution that minimizes inequalities or increases equality, aligning with social democratic theory (Thomas, cited in Odekon, 2015). This perspective suggests that people should respect the principle of equality because inequality is a property that worsens outcomes. Non-teleological equality, on the other hand, involves treating people equally in a fundamental sense, emphasizing the need to avoid overall inequalities.

Governments and authorized organizations legitimize individual and group judgments about equality of opportunity through policies and programs related to voting rights, educational rights, economic rights, women's rights, and racial rights. Equality requires that no one be treated inappropriately, emphasizing the importance of fair treatment. The deontological theory posits that "people are equals and should be treated as equals" (McKerlie, 1996). However, even when accepting that something is valuable (such as caste, ethnicity, location, relation, preferences, resources, or capacity), questions may arise about why certain individuals receive benefits while others do not, prompting inquiries into the rationale behind such decisions.

To frame the discussion, I introduce two key factors that create the illusion of treating people with equal opportunity. Firstly, we must consider whether people treat equality of opportunity as an objective valuation. This includes equality in education, participation in public concerns, and access to resources, which significantly influence individual achievement in terms of labor market success, preparation for democratic citizenship, and general human flourishing. Secondly, we must examine the principle that people's life chances should not be determined by morally arbitrary circumstances of their birth, such as social class, race, or gender. However, the precise meaning and implications of the ideal of equality of educational opportunity remain subjects of substantial disagreement (Jencks, 1988).

Mulderrig (2018) defines basic equality as the belief that, at a fundamental level, all human beings are of equal worth and importance and should receive equal care and respect. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR] (1948) identifies this as a fundamental human right, emphasizing the dignity and worth of the human person and the equal rights of men and women. However, while it addresses some of the most significant aspects of people's lives, it does not provide a comprehensive solution, nor has it consistently addressed persistent injustices and inequalities in the world. As Baker et al. (2006: 4) observe, the UDHR "does not challenge widespread inequalities in people's living conditions or even in their civil rights or educational and economic opportunities. It calls on us to avoid inhumanity; it does not necessarily couch its message in terms of justice as distinct from charity." Waldron (2008, cited in Kirby, 2017) argues that we should value, nurture, and respect all human beings.

The paper aims to explore the concept of equal opportunity and the various perspectives surrounding it. It questions the assumption that everyone is treated equally and examines the

reasons behind prioritizing the improvement of the worst off. The paper also delves into the deontological theory, advocating for equal treatment of all individuals. However, the paper acknowledges that even if something is considered valuable, it may raise questions about why certain individuals or groups receive preferential treatment. The paper highlights the need to critically analyze and challenge simplistic approaches to equal opportunity and explores the unresolved criteria for achieving true equal opportunity in different contexts.

Methodology

This study used a desk review methodology, which is a method that focuses on the collection and analysis of existing literature rather than the gathering of new data using experiments or fieldwork. The desk review enables the researcher to identify, evaluate, and synthesize knowledge on a specific subject by examining previously published research, reports, and theoretical papers. The topic of the discussion is the influence of socio-economic factors on the perception of equality of opportunity. The review employs narrative methodologies, which include a methodical process of finding relevant literature and succinctly summarizing significant discoveries. The goal is to provide a comprehensive and perceptive understanding of the subject by analyzing the many approaches used by scholars in studying the correlation between socioeconomic determinants and equality of opportunity.

To begin, the researcher methodically searched academic databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest, to retrieve relevant material. To identify the most appropriate research, we incorporated criteria such as "socio-economic impact on opportunity," "equality of opportunity in education," and "illusion of equality." After identifying the relevant sources, the researcher used narrative approaches to arrange these results and succinctly outline the primary points. This study used many significant ideas to provide a conceptual basis for comprehending the impact of socio-economic determinants on the sense of opportunity. The fundamental principle of the equality theory focuses on the essential prerequisites for equal opportunity. Democratic philosophy underscores the need for equitable participation in society. Marxian theory investigates the economic systems and class struggles that perpetuate inequality. The structural-functional theory scrutinizes the distribution of opportunities across social systems.

We examined Marxian theory to get insight into how capitalism and class hierarchies create systematic obstacles to achieving equitable opportunities, especially in fields such as education and healthcare. This idea facilitates comprehension of the disparity in perceived prospects between lower socio-economic groupings and wealthy ones. These searches facilitated the identification of research and papers that examine how socio-economic inequities persistently impact access to resources, despite the presence of equal opportunity. Through the examination of concepts such as the "illusion of equality in meritocracy," the analysis has revealed research that demonstrates how socio-economic variables may give rise to concealed obstacles, even within institutions that seem to provide equal opportunities. This explanation

focuses on the procedures used to carry out the study, the theoretical frameworks used, and how the narrative approaches facilitated a thorough investigation of the subject matter.

Results

Theoretical Perspective of Equality of Opportunity

The theory of social democracy (Odekon, 2015) does not advocate for complete economic equality, where everyone receives the same wages and salaries. However, it does advocate for social equality, which prioritizes treating all citizens as human beings with equal moral worth and potential. This means that no one should face discrimination or lack access to education, employment, health care, housing, or welfare due to their sex or gender, race or ethnicity, or socioeconomic background. In this regard, social democracy also strongly promotes equality of opportunity. Poverty and other forms of socioeconomic deprivation should not be acceptable to avoid all factors that affected individuals from enjoying access to education. Through equal learning opportunities, individuals can acquire the necessary qualifications or skills to achieve social mobility. As a result, social democracy has advocated for free education to ensure that children from impoverished backgrounds can receive a high-quality education. In this context, ability, effort, or talent primarily temper residual inequalities, leading social democratic theorists to believe in a meritocracy over inheritance, favouritism, or privilege.

Drawing the concept of equality in Marx, whose work reveals a consistent unity between his philosophical, economic, and political thinking, he claims that the identical social position of men in classless societies. In this way, Marx's point concerning equality does not indicate a protection of everyone's equality in terms of their personal needs, but the protection of the dominance of social classes and, as a consequence, of the equality of all in terms of socioeconomic position or, in other words, he meant that only with the socialization of the means of production, and thus with the elimination of private property and of the exploitation of labor inherent to class societies, can everyone count on equal opportunity of work and on salaries well-matched with the production of each one. Therefore, for Marx, equality is not confused with the uniformity of laws, as understood by liberal ideology; for Marx, the private property that should be repressed is that of the means of production (Katál, 2013).

From this sociological perspective, one is to claim that the effective ways of equality of opportunity should be based on the principle of meritocracy, but another theory, like the capitalist theory of Marx, believes that social democracy theory does not accept the situations that exist, and this theory suggests that the basic principle of equality of opportunity should be based on the class background of people, which is an important factor influencing level of achievement. The idea that we all enter on equal terms is an illusion. In this way, the concept of equality has an empathy with that of liberty, considering that only in a society of economic and

social well-being, free of a concern for survival, will men be capable of incorporating the cultural assets and moral values that will be available to everyone and also of fully realizing their capacities and potential (Marx & Engels, 2000).

Opportunity and education

It is imperative to first establish a general definition of an opportunity in order to comprehend educational opportunity. Westen (1985) offers a pertinent description, characterising an opportunity as a connection between an agent or a collective of agents and a sought-after objective, facilitated by certain impediments, all of which are surmountable. Obstacles such as residing in a rural location, being from an underprivileged family background, and encountering language challenges hinder a Dalit student's access to education.

To apply the concept of equality of opportunity in education, we must consider three key questions: who the proper agents are, what the appropriate goal is, and what legitimate obstacles exist. For example, if the goal is admission to a selective college and the educational institution is the agent, relevant academic criteria like passing an entrance exam and paying tuition should be the only obstacles. Factors like race, sex, or religion should not pose barriers. Equality of opportunity is achieved when all applicants face only relevant obstacles, such as an entrance test, and not irrelevant ones like discrimination. For instance, a Dalit student and a student from an elite background have equal opportunity if the only obstacle is passing the test. However, if the Dalit student also faces discrimination, equality is not achieved. Education act and equal opportunity

Formal equality of opportunity is a principle that states that rules based on human attributes should not hinder certain objectives, such as race, socio-economic status, gender, religion, and sexuality. It is often seen as a principle against discrimination and aims to eliminate legal barriers to educational opportunities. However, it is not enough to address the impact of informal regulations, societal norms, and private discrimination on a child's educational chances. In Nepal, schools are seen as a microcosm of society, influenced by social standards and racial segregation, and merely providing equal opportunities within the educational system cannot achieve this objective.

Educational Opportunity and Merit basis

The meritocratic perspective suggests that educational resources should be distributed based on individual merit, often measured through entrance requirements or aptitude tests. However, this approach has limitations, particularly in considering children's social conditions. It also overlooks the creation of merit in education itself. It is particularly problematic when applied to very young children, as they need to cultivate certain capacities, and the task of teaching reading is not solely about merit.

Equity and Educational Opportunity

In the context of limits of formal equality of opportunity, Rawls develop a conception, and is called fair equality of opportunity that require 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). it holds that all citizens of a society count as the relevant agents, the desired goal is workplace and positions, and the obstacles people should not face includes their social class background.

When applied to education, this principle may support educational measures that close the achievement gap between the rich and the poor with the same high talent potentials, assuming that these children can be identified. This is because such students from poorer backgrounds should charge as well as their better-off peers with the same potentials. The Rawlsian principle of fair equality of opportunity aims to eliminate the effects of social background and economic class on educational achievement. Fair equality of opportunity therefore offers a radical interpretation of equality of educational opportunity.

Debates on the meaning of equality of opportunity could be derived on the basis of two major aspects. One is diverse goals and measurement of equality; the other is equal opportunity in education that can be achieved when everyone with similar talent gets the same results. The first question is to be considered in the formulation of the diverse goals. All individuals have differences in terms of their birth, cast, religion, location, gender, and socioeconomic status. Therefore, the major role of the state is to formulate the police regarding an individual's needs and condition.

The second question, here, datable is whether, is equal opportunity in goods and services that can be achieved when everyone with similar talent gets the same results? When each individual investment is equalized? When those with the same natural talent possible get the same opportunities? Answers to these two fundamental questions enable philosophers to make an idea about equality of opportunity. The Rawls work on the criticism of political theory of utilitarianism and he found that the prominent aim of social policy is the maximization of welfare but He opposed, first its aggregative character, unconcern about the pattern of distribution of welfare and the second objection of this theory is the aspect of a person's condition which advices normative attention. Rawls (2009) suggest that the metric of equality or metric of welfare is absolutely powerful but the combination of equality and welfare by primary goods was not correspondingly forceful, he recommended that "equality of opportunity for welfare" instead of normative attention.

He engages in the discussion of equality of opportunity through his concept of capability, emphasizing individuals' ability to reach their full potential over mere welfare or its allocation.

He contends that equality of opportunity should prioritize empowering individuals to achieve their objectives. Sen's methodology transcends the concepts of Rawls, who promotes equality of opportunity regarding wellbeing, and Mill, who emphasizes individual enjoyment. These philosophical discussions also provoke issues about possible contradictions with other values, like family and diversity. What constraints do parental rights place on the quest for equal opportunity? Furthermore, is affirmative action necessary to advance or hinder equality of opportunity? (Sen, 1980).

Marxist view does not accept to this view because this process can't be equalizing in result (Katal, 2013). The insight from this meta-analysis is equality does not indicate a protection of everyone's equality in terms of their personal needs, but the protection of the dominance of social classes or all people of society have to get equal chances to participate in different socioeconomic positions and socialization with the means of production or people have get equal opportunity for enhancing the capacity of individuals. Thus, the meaning of equality of opportunity has still remain in illusion.

Discussion

This article aims to assess the perspective on equal education by examining the fundamental concepts of egalitarian theory, democratic theory, and Marx's conflict theory of education in the context of basic education in Nepal. Nepalese society has a well-established presence of social, cultural, and ethnic variety. According to the 2011 census data, Hindus comprised 80.6% of Nepal's population, while Buddhists made up 10.7%. The remaining population primarily included Muslims, Kirats, Christians, and Jains. As a result, children from various ethnic and religious groups have diverse educational needs (CBS, 2011).

To meet these requirements, we must not only grant access to educational institutions, but we must also efficiently manage educational opportunities in the parents' native language. Within this framework, the egalitarian philosophy of equality in education should establish its premises on the equitable assessment of human dignity, thereby ensuring equal treatment for all individuals. The theory's origins closely correspond to the concept of human rights. While egalitarian principles may not directly address the specific needs of children, they have played a significant role in shaping societal systems. While education may be accessible, there remains an unequal distribution of school attendance among children.

Parson (1959) argues that schools should serve as microcosms of society, and educational opportunities should be based on individual achievement rather than inherited status. This theory, in line with egalitarian principles, argues against the unequal distribution of educational opportunities. However, it introduces the idea that an individual's innate abilities or skill levels can create opportunities within education. In practice, the formal education system implements this notion by establishing criteria such as admission tests, past exam results, incentive systems, and other measures to allocate resources for basic education.

The structural functionalist theory may help overcome inherent ability gaps between wealthy and poor. It is not broad enough to reduce basic education opportunity gaps. According to this approach, we should distribute tasks and responsibilities depending on skill, considering nature and nurture (Santrock, 2007). This strategy has limits in educational situations, especially in cultures with large socioeconomic inequality. Even when we provide children from diverse socioeconomic origins similar educational chances, the results are frequently uneven. Upper-class Nepalese children do better academically. Many hidden characteristics linked with lower socioeconomic position maintain this inequality.

These variables directly affect educational success, producing a disparity that equal opportunity cannot close. These gaps show that structural functionalist approaches to educational inequality fail. It offers a framework for understanding how society assigns positions based on aptitude, but it fails to account for the various socioeconomic conditions that affect educational attainment. To reduce educational inequality in Nepal, a more sophisticated strategy is needed. This method should provide equitable chances and mitigate socioeconomic disadvantages that limit a child's capacity to take advantage of them. Policymakers may create a more fair educational system that promotes social mobility and decreases inequality by recognizing and addressing these underlying variables.

The government's basic education policy aligns with the UNESCO 2030 agenda for education (UNESCO, 2015), which emphasizes the transformative power of education as a primary driver of development and a means to achieve other proposed goals. This commitment recognizes education's crucial role in shaping individual lives and societal progress. However, in Nepalese society, the provision of equal opportunity in education at the basic level, as conceived by egalitarian and functional theories, proves insufficient. The complex socioeconomic landscape of Nepal requires a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to educational equity. Recognizing this need, the School Sector Development Program [SSDP] (2016-2023) explicitly addresses the equity of basic education in Nepal.

This program goes beyond the simple notion of equal access, aiming to tackle the multifaceted challenges that hinder true educational equality in the country. The SSDP acknowledges that achieving equity in basic education involves more than just providing universal access. It requires addressing various socio-economic factors that influence educational outcomes, such as poverty, geographical isolation, gender disparities, and cultural barriers. By explicitly focusing on equity, the SSDP seeks to ensure that all children in Nepal, regardless of their background or circumstances, have not just equal access to education but also equal opportunities to succeed within the educational system. This approach reflects a more sophisticated understanding of educational equality, one that considers the diverse needs and challenges of Nepal's population. It represents a step towards a more inclusive and effective educational policy that aims to truly transform lives through education, in line with both national goals and international commitments.

The Marxist perspective is against the theory in question, as it is impossible for the outcome to be equalising (Katál, 2013). Marx maintains that the elite maintains the status quo in

the education system due to the fact that the upper class has access to more resources and opportunities to benefit from high-quality education. As a result, students from these schools get better rankings in the test system, enhancing their opportunities to pursue further study and well-compensated employment. The education system in Nepal classifies schools into two categories: private and public. Private schools provide a more sophisticated educational setting and prioritise the well-being of their pupils compared to public schools. Private schools demonstrate superior educational attainment compared to community institutions.

According to Marx, the differences in educational achievement also lead to differences in other opportunities, such as the job market. The perspective of structural functional theory appears to be in opposition to Marxism. For functionalists, the market is always open and offers opportunities to those who possess merit in their respective groups. For example, the tenth plan of Nepal's higher education policy stipulates that the management of resources in higher education is based on the principle of cost recovery, which deters poor families from enrolling in higher education. Marx contends that ensuring education opportunities based on merit leads to the affluence of upper class children and the impoverishment of lower class children. Bowls and Gintis (2013) support his argument that "education reproduces the attitudes and behaviors for labor divisions." The gap between the rich and the poor is widening, meaning that education is reproducing more social inequality.

In our society, the exclusion of individuals from educational services primarily results from three factors: their affiliation with higher or lower social classes or marginalized groups, their geographical location, and their physical accessibility. We pay particular attention to physical accessibility, regardless of whether individuals live in rural, urban, seasonal, or permanent settings. The third factor, situational, refers to social and economic circumstances. The constitutional provision on education guarantees equal opportunities for all, prohibiting discrimination based on caste, religion, language, or personal circumstances. It also emphasizes the right to free and compulsory education at both the basic and secondary levels.

Conclusion

Formal equality of opportunity emphasizes that personal characteristics such as race, socio-economic class, gender, religion, and sexuality should not hinder access to equal educational opportunities. While necessary, formal equality alone is insufficient to ensure genuine equality, as political and moral philosophers widely acknowledge. Marxist theory critiques formal equality, arguing that true equal opportunity must address broader social norms and private discrimination. In contrast, Rawls' concept of fair equality of opportunity advocates for a system that provides equal chances for all individuals, particularly those with talent and motivation, while reducing disparities between the rich and the poor. However, this approach does not fully resolve deeper structural inequalities. The findings of this study align with earlier theoretical frameworks, confirming the illusion of complete equality of opportunity in education. Despite progress, significant gaps remain that must be addressed. When designing policies to enhance equality of opportunity in education, it is crucial to consider personal characteristics, micro-level contextual factors, and other relevant disparities. Ultimately, the

objective should be to improve the well-being of individuals by implementing policies grounded in the principles of political, moral, and social equality, aiming to create a more just and inclusive educational system.

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