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Steven V. Mazie, Bard College

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Equality, race and gifted education

An egalitarian critique of admission to New York City’s specialized high schools

STEVEN MAZIE
Bard High School Early College, Manhattan, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Educational programs for gifted students face both philosophical and practical challenges from egalitarians. Some object that gifted schools inherently undermine a commitment to equality in education, while others observe that schools for talented students cater to privileged youth and effectively discriminate against disadvantaged minorities. This article taps into recent theorizing on equality to explore an illuminating case study: admissions policies at New York City’s so-called ‘specialized’ high schools. After dismissing less nuanced proposals on both ends of the spectrum, I draw upon Elizabeth Anderson’s theory of ‘democratic egalitarianism’ to argue that, while schools devoted to talented students could be seen as consistent with a commitment to equality, admissions policies for these schools must reach beyond meritocratic principles to ensure diversity in their student bodies. Racial and socioeconomic integration of social institutions, including schools – and elite schools perhaps most of all – should be a priority for those who care about democracy.

KEYWORDS egalitarianism, Elizabeth Anderson, equality of education, gifted education, meritocracy, standardized tests

INTRODUCTION

JUST BEFORE THE SCHOOL YEAR BEGAN in the fall of 2006, a New York Times article highlighted a potent case study of urban inequity. The student bodies of several of New York City’s most prestigious public high schools are not only thoroughly imbalanced along racial lines – a surprise to few – but even more imbalanced than they were ten years ago, the Times reported. Some of the top schools saw their non-Asian minority enrollments decline by 50 per cent over
the past decade, despite greater efforts to prepare underrepresented students for the admissions examination. At Stuyvesant High School, housed in a state-of-the-art building across from the World Trade Center site, the 98.7 per cent graduation rate and 98 per cent daily attendance only begin to set it apart from its public high school peers. Its $148-million building features 12 science labs, 12 shops (for robotics, ceramics and photography, among other things), a pool, two gyms and a digital satellite-equipped monitor in every classroom. Stuyvesant’s graduates include leaders in every field and four Nobel laureates. The students at Stuyvesant are, it is safe to say, the lucky ones. Their prospects for college study and career success are light-years ahead of those of the average New York City teen. Yet in a city in which 70 per cent of the children are black or Hispanic, less than 5 per cent of these minorities are found in the halls of Stuyvesant High School.

Do more talented children deserve to be educated in elite public schools? What standards should dictate admission to these programs? Should we be troubled if certain races are underrepresented in schools for the gifted? Why, exactly? In this article, I use the inequalities of New York City’s public school system – and the specialized test schools in particular – as a jumping-off point for thinking about the proper role of the state in the education of gifted children, and the connection of this important policy question to one of the most heated debates in moral and political philosophy today: how the ideal of equality should be pursued.

In Section 1, ‘Inequalities in American schooling and the place of gifted education’, I provide an overview of the racial and socioeconomic inequalities in the US educational system and discuss the findings concerning New York City’s elite high schools in this context. In Section 2, ‘Luck and equality’, I sketch the controversial theory of luck egalitarianism that has come to dominate the pages of moral philosophy journals over the past two decades and outline an alternative to this understanding of equality that offers a more useful lens for analyzing gifted education. In Section 3, ‘How to be an egalitarian’, I examine three normative perspectives – meritocracy, strict egalitarianism and democratic egalitarianism – one might adopt when considering educational institutions like Stuyvesant High School in Lower Manhattan. After exploring the principle and application of each response in turn, I argue that the third perspective is the most compelling. In the Conclusion, I develop principles of gifted education that might serve the cause of a defensible theory of egalitarian justice. While special programs and schools for gifted students are in certain cases justifiable according to principles of equality, a selection process that results in gross racial imbalances is not. Democratic society is not served by elite educational institutions that – by design or by accident – cater to only a narrow slice of the population.
Political philosophers who study public education have begun to move beyond discussions of civic education curricula and toward the broader question of how to promote the goal of educational equality. This is a welcome development, for it devotes much-needed attention to children in the United States who attend underperforming schools and to the great disparities between the educational experiences of children from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds. As important as the question of civic education is to the foundation of a democratic polity, it means little without serious attention to what Jonathan Kozol has termed the ‘savage inequalities’ of primary and secondary education in the United States (Kozol, 1992).

In his recent work, Kozol has focused on the racial overtones of educational inequality in America: the fact that the color of a child’s skin is a reliable predictor of the quality of the education she will receive. In The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America, Kozol fleshes out a now-familiar story of the lost promise of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision by visiting schools in eleven states and exposing the inequalities of schooling that consistently track racial differences (Kozol, 2005). Scholarly research bears out Kozol’s charge of de facto apartheid in America’s schools. In a 2006 study, Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee found that integration of white and black students peaked in the late 1980s – particularly in the South, where 44 per cent of black students attended schools that were majority white – and receded precipitously following a relaxation of desegregation standards by the US Supreme Court in the 1990s (Orfield and Lee, 2006). And despite the 2003 Grutter v. Bollinger ruling that permitted public universities to consider race in admissions (though not, as it determined in Gratz v. Bollinger, to assign racial status a quantifiable value), ballot measures in several key states have pushed back the ideal of integration in higher education as well. Voluntary efforts to integrate public schools along racial lines are facing a great deal of resistance, and the Supreme Court invalidated two such efforts in Louisville and Seattle in 2007. Today, the quest for the integration of public schools in the United States stands at an impasse. In its place has emerged a national effort to ensure a minimal level of educational output from students in all public schools regardless of race or socioeconomic status. The centerpiece of this standards-based movement is the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.

Most school finance litigation and advocacy groups today focus on providing something akin to the NCLB standard: a ‘sound basic education’ or a ‘thorough and efficient education’ for all. But as these goals are pursued with an eye to raising the achievement level of the weakest students and bringing
them up to a specified minimum, many states continue to sponsor programs on the other end of the continuum. They provide resources, curriculum enhancements, after-school programs and entire schools dedicated to the strongest students. Thirty-seven states have laws requiring services for the gifted, of which 28 specify that educational programs must be suited to meet the needs of every gifted student. Very little in the way of direct funds to support gifted programs comes from the federal government, though the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Act of 1988 helped to establish the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented and a 1993 US Department of Education report observed that ‘most gifted and talented students spend their school days without attention paid to their special learning needs’ and should be provided with more challenging curriculum standards, increased access to early childhood education and flexibility and variety in their coursework (US Department of Education, 1993: 1–3). The report identified a ‘quiet crisis’ in which ‘talented students often fail to reach their full potential’ (US Department of Education, 1993: 5). To correct this shortcoming, gifted children deserve something extra: ‘we must build better schools in order to create a better society’ (US Department of Education, 1993: 30).

The two most pressing questions surrounding gifted education over the past few decades have been the related matters of how to define giftedness and how to reliably identify gifted children (Callahan, 1997; Konstantopoulos et al., 2001; Phillips, 1983). These concerns – particularly the identification question – are closely linked with the racially imbalanced nature of public schooling in America (Renzulli and Reis, 2004). For years scholars of gifted education have been vexed by the relative dearth of students from traditionally underrepresented groups and from poor families who find their way into gifted programs. Despite the US Department of Education’s call in its 1993 report to ‘eliminate barriers to participation of economically disadvantaged and minority students … with outstanding talents’ (US Department of Education, 1993: 28) and despite numerous efforts to bring such children into gifted programs, ‘abundant data suggest that gifted programs are perhaps the most segregated educational programs in this nation’ (Ford, 1995: 22).

This certainly holds for some of New York City’s most sought-after public high schools. As the recent statistics show, attempts to increase minority enrollment in these schools have thus far been futile. In fact, minority enrollments are falling. The most well-known and most desirable of New York’s ‘specialized’ high schools (Stuyvesant High School, Bronx High School of Science and Brooklyn Technical High School) have seen declining black and Hispanic enrollments over the past decade. The flagship school, Stuyvesant High, now has only 2.0 per cent black students (down from 4.4 per cent in 1995), in a city whose public school system is about 35 per cent black. The numbers are little
better at Bronx Science, where 4.4 per cent of the students were black in 2007–8, down from 11.8 per cent in 1994–95. At Brooklyn Tech, the decline was even steeper: to 12.6 per cent from 37.3 per cent (Gootman, 2006; Hernandez, 2008).

2. Luck and Equality

On their face, these numbers suggest an educational system that is grossly unequal in its distribution of one of the most significant public benefits the state provides. But as recent debates among moral and political philosophers have confirmed with dizzying intensity, there are many ways to be an egalitarian, and different views would regard the statistics in quite different ways. One of the most visible fault lines on the broad left wing of philosophical discussion of equality is between ‘luck egalitarians’ and, for lack of a better term, non-luck egalitarians. Both sides believe that, in general, individuals should be treated with equal concern and respect. Both camps are opposed to state policies that discriminate on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion or economic status. Both are committed to greater economic equality among citizens as well. Where the two sides differ is over the degree to which luck should be permitted to influence an individual’s life and to provide the ontological focus of a theory of equality.

Luck egalitarians include Richard Arneson, Gerald Cohen, John Roemer and Ronald Dworkin, although Dworkin disputes his inclusion in the group (Dworkin, 2003). These theorists argue that the only kinds of inequalities that are consistent with a just society are those stemming from individuals’ own efforts and exertions. Inequalities arising from unchosen circumstances of birth, such as race, beauty, parentage or economic status, or those sprouting from native endowments such as intelligence, inborn talents or disabilities, are unfair. Lucky individuals born to highly educated parents with favorable genetic dispositions and financial resources do not deserve a better life than their unlucky counterparts. Political societies, for luck egalitarians, should not attempt to equalize luck (this perhaps only a deity could do) but should attempt to nullify or at least minimize the effects of luck on individuals’ life prospects. This principle leads Arneson to advocate equality of opportunity for welfare, Dworkin to a theory of equality of resources and Cohen to equality of access to advantage more generally.

Some luck egalitarians trace their theories to several features of John Rawls’s theory of liberalism but, as Samuel Scheffler convincingly argues, Rawls himself is not best interpreted as a luck egalitarian (Scheffler, 2003). It is easy to pinpoint the source of misunderstanding. In distinguishing his theory from the libertarian ‘natural lottery’, also known as the ‘system of natural
justice’ or the ‘ideal historical process’ view (Rawls, 2001: 53), Rawls remarks that his theory of justice as fairness takes account of natural contingencies and the ‘inequalities in citizens’ life-prospects’ that are likely to result. He lists these contingencies as:

(a) their class of origin: the class into which they were born and develop until the age of reason;
(b) their native endowments (as opposed to their realized endowments); and their opportunities to develop these endowments as affected by their social class of origin;
(c) their good or ill fortune, or good and bad luck, over the course of life (how they are affected by illness and accident; and, say, by periods of involuntary unemployment and regional economic decline) (Rawls, 2001: 55).

So among the aspects of our lives that are ‘arbitrary from a moral point of view’ are the resources of our parents, the ways in which our parents’ wealth or poverty influences the range of our opportunities as children, our intelligence and native talents, the health of the economy in which we compete, the proximity of our homes to a hurricane storm surge, our genetic predisposition to various diseases – in a word, our luck. Those who find luck-egalitarian premises folded into these comments might be forgiven were it not for the context in which Rawls presents them. Scheffler cites Rawls’s clarification in A Theory of Justice that justice as fairness is not to be confused with ‘the principle of redress’ according to which undeserved and thus morally arbitrary inequalities ‘of birth and natural endowment … are somehow to be compensated for’ (Rawls, 1971: 100). For Rawls, observing that many inequalities are the result of nature or brute luck does not imply a commitment to eliminate or even minimize these inequalities.

On the contrary: for Rawls, certain inequalities are both inevitable and necessary in a thriving democratic society: ‘any modern society … must rely on some inequalities to be well designed and effectively organized’ (Rawls, 2001: 55). The question becomes not how to militate against nature and contingency but how to adjust political principles in ways that promote the idea of ‘society as a fair system of cooperation between citizens as free and equal’ given that such contingencies exist (Rawls, 2001: 56). While Rawls does not propose or imply a luck-egalitarian theory, then, he does draw our attention to the moral and political relevance of luck to questions of justice. A defensible theory of justice, he implies, must take account of these facts in drawing up its principles. It should, for example, regulate inheritance and bequests to reduce inequalities of property ownership and – crucially for the subject of this article – make provisions for ‘fair equality of opportunity in education’ (Rawls, 2001: 53). But once the principles are put into place via appropriate legislation, resulting
inequalities are not unjust: ‘This allows us to abstract from the enormous complexities of the innumerable transactions of daily life and frees us from having to keep track of the changing relative positions of particular individuals’ (Rawls, 2001: 54).

In this comment from Rawls we find one of the most persuasive objections to a full-blooded theory of luck egalitarianism: it is unworkable. Luck comes and goes; economies ebb and flow; robust health fades; today’s jackpot winner is tomorrow’s debtor. Attempting to compensate for all of the unchosen aspects of every individual’s life (taking from the lucky and giving to the unlucky) is untenable for even the most ambitious political society. To commit to such an ideal is to be hamstrung by contingency. More fundamentally, luck egalitarianism trades on a distinction between choices and circumstances that is hazy at best. While Rawls notes that ‘native endowments’ are among the unchosen contingencies of human life and distinguishes these from ‘realized endowments’ – talents we choose to cultivate – he does not claim that it is easy to place our various skills and talents in the proper categories. Indeed, he notes that an additional contingency on top of natural gifts is the familial and social setting in which a child is raised. So a ‘diamond in the rough’ – a child with natural gifts but little family money or support for harnessing her talents – is privileged in one way and deprived in another, just as a wealthy child of low inborn intelligence with access to expensive tutors and private schools has her share of unchosen burdens and benefits. But how are we to look at either student’s performance and decide what portion of her success or failure is due to ‘realized endowments’? And even if we could develop a trusty method for stripping away all contingency from an individual’s situation to lay bare exactly what portion of success or failure she is responsible for and therefore ‘deserves’, would we want to use it? Such a device would have the bizarre effect of penalizing individuals who had the support of loving parents and rewarding those who could demonstrate a background devoid of inspiring schoolteachers.

Elizabeth Anderson has expanded on these worries about luck egalitarianism to develop an alternative theory that she calls ‘democratic egalitarianism’ (Anderson, 1999). Anderson criticizes luck egalitarianism for being both harsh (in holding individuals entirely responsible for their choices and smiling as they hoist themselves on their own petards) and insulting (in distributing benefits to disabled people with a dose of contemptuous condescension). To deny all public benefits to a homeless man because his own mistakes led to his destitution is callous; and to provide compensation to people for the burden of their inborn defects is stigmatizing. Anderson’s democratic egalitarian alternative draws on Amartya Sen’s focus on capabilities to ‘guarantee effective access to the social conditions of freedom to all citizens’ (Anderson, 1999: 326). She sees equality as a set of social conditions in which people may relate
to each other as equals. This approach, which I will expand upon below, envisions equality as ‘a relationship among people rather than merely a pattern in the distribution of divisible goods’ (Anderson, 1999: 336). The function of education, then, goes beyond distributing benefit packets to individual students for their private use – it has implications for the social and political relationships comprising democratic society as well.

3. How to be an egalitarian

The academic debate over the nature of equality is generally confined to the realm of theory. When illustrations pop up, they are usually discussed briefly and in general terms, with imaginative obscurities (hungry surfers [Van Parijs, 1991] or ennui-plagued expensive taste monsters [Cohen, 1989]) trumping real-world inequities. One virtue of Anderson’s 1999 article is its call to redirect political theorizing about equality to issues that matter (Anderson, 1999: 288). The question of racial disparities in gifted education, and the status of New York’s specialized high schools in particular, offers a concrete case study for applying, testing and assessing rival theories of egalitarianism.

Meritocracy

Before addressing two of the most influential theories of equality, we should consider the strength of a position that may seem antithetical to egalitarian concerns. According to the meritocratic ideal, a natural aristocracy of the talented and industrious should be identified and elevated to positions of power and responsibility. Merit is the sole standard to determine how influential and prestigious roles are filled, and everyone’s talents are considered with an unbiased eye. This means your parents, your race, your religion and your wealth – and any other morally arbitrary aspects of your identity – are irrelevant. Meritocracy could thus be interpreted as blindfold egalitarianism: it evaluates every applicant in precisely the same way, using identical objective criteria. By state law, admission to New York City’s specialized high schools is determined solely by applicants’ performance on the Secondary High School Aptitude Test (SHSAT), a timed, multiple-choice exam of verbal and mathematical skills. Of the 28,000 eighth-grade students who chose to sit this exam in 2007 (less than one-third of those who are eligible to take it) just under 6000 were admitted to one of eight specialized schools for the fall of 2008. Of these, around 850 were offered admission to Stuyvesant, the flagship. These students comprise less than 1 per cent of all New York City public school ninth graders.

After the New York Times ran its story on increasing racial imbalances at the elite schools in August 2006, some contributors to an online discussion about
the findings expressed support for the meritocratic admissions policy at Stuyvesant. Here is one such unedited entry, from a user named Mike (I have corrected only his spelling mistakes):

As a stuyvesant alum, I have a few big issues with this article, and the flawed arguments it presents:
1) You can't argue with admissions' methodology when you look at the results … I can't imagine a greater collection of intellect and drive than at Stuyvesant (including the Harvards of the world).
2) College/job admissions is FAR more flawed (nepotism, admissions consultants writing/forging entire applications). The NYC specialized high school test is one of the institutions in this country blind to all factors … ESPECIALLY MONEY … you can pay for all the tutors you want, but your child still has to sit and outperform tens-of-thousands of others … daddy can't call in any favors for this one … hard work is the only thing that gets it done.
3) The REAL argument here is whether schools like Stuyvesant should exist at all – pulling best students out of all the other public schools – shouldn't Harvard civil rights people be more worried about the kids left behind, and rid themselves of the biased assumption that you can't get a good education unless you go to one of the specialized schools?
4) How can you argue that the problem is all these kids are getting tutors on the side and then say Asian population is up to 60% … How many Asian families are able to afford private tutoring? Many Stuyvesant students are first generation, children of immigrants, many even immigrants themselves. Those parents may get it for their kids, but not because they're rich, but because they know it's important.
Jen is right in her assessment. It's not about the test. If the school exists, the test is BY FAR the best way to dictate admissions. It's what else goes on that needs to change. ('Mike', 2006)

Let us scrutinize some of these claims. According to Mike's first argument, the proof is in the pudding: Stuyvesant's superb intellectual climate and the successes of its graduates validate the admissions criteria. How can you argue with dazzling success? Peeling back the self-serving veneer of the comment, we find a very narrow claim about what counts as favorable ‘results’ of an admissions policy. Pointing to the success of graduates as the sole consideration ignores the range of individuals who become those graduates. Such a perspective could justify policies of nepotism or outright racism just as easily: if it is the aura of the place and the deeds of its graduates that matter (the Nobel laureates are often mentioned in this vein), why should we worry about how the students are selected?

Mike's second and fourth arguments form the classic meritocratic point: the SHSAT gives the hardest working eighth graders a chance to show their stuff, whoever they are and however rich their parents might be. By focusing on a test and a test only, illegitimate considerations never creep in. In the words of one Stuyvesant alum, the ‘race bandits’ who worry about racial representation at these elite schools ‘are the Ebolus of excellence’ (Hart, 1997). What about
the possibility that the test itself is culturally biased, or that success on the test may be bought? (A Kaplan or Princeton Review course can cost $2000 or more, while private tutoring costs $300 an hour and up.) Mike points to the Asian students: a 10 per cent minority in the New York City population that now boasts majorities in the three most selective specialized schools. If blacks and Hispanics have found less success in admissions than their Asian counterparts, this is because their parents care less about education. (Mike doesn’t mention that Asian child poverty rates in New York City, while high, are significantly lower than poverty rates among blacks and Hispanics [Children’s Defense Fund – New York, 2007]. Nor does he tell us what percentage of Asian students at Stuyvesant are poor.) Or, as another blogger claimed with unnerving certainty, the racial demographics at New York’s elite high schools may simply track reality:

Er, let’s quit beating around the bush here – we see this racial stratification all over the world … because the IQ ladder goes like:

East Asians
Whites
Latinos
Blacks

We can no longer afford to deny this reality and sandbag all the smart kids with intellectual Communism. Right now, we are already outsourcing all our high-IQ work to Asians … who are smarter and work harder. That’s the facts as shown by our free market economy – not a bunch of liberal BS artists. Let’s just let water seek its own damn level for once … cuz it will anyways no matter how you try to manipulate it. (‘Sir Deurr’, 2006)

This reasoning, consistent with the controversial findings in The Bell Curve (Hernstein and Murray, 1996), asserts that natural intellectual disparities among the races account for the disparities at Stuyvesant and elsewhere. Don’t blame the test: blame nature. As Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute argues (without taking a position on what causes the racial imbalances), ‘It’s not the specialized schools’ fault for maintaining legitimately high standards’ (Quoted in Gootman, 2006).

Whether the Bell Curve findings are valid or not, this argument depends on the claim that raw intelligence is the sole factor that should determine admission to the top schools. Motivation, previous academic success, intellectual curiosity, communication skills – among other intellectual qualities and achievements – are irrelevant, to say nothing of concerns about cultural, racial or socioeconomic diversity. A shiftless student with a D average in middle school and intellectual gifts can get into Stuyvesant if he applies himself for two and a half hours on the SHSAT. But a hard-working straight-A student who scores just under the cutoff on the exam is roped out. And the distortions are even more troubling than these possibilities suggest. Owing to a scoring quirk that recently came to light, students whose scores on both the math and
verbal sections of the SHSAT are very high but short of perfect have little chance of admittance to Stuyvesant, but those who score exceptionally high on only one of the sections are virtually guaranteed to get in. In 2005, a student with a 99 percentile score in math and 49 percentile in verbal would have been admitted to Stuyvesant High School – the most coveted specialized school – but a student with a 97 in math and 92 in verbal would not (Herszenhorn, 2005). The SHSAT thus rewards students with fine-tuned skills in one subject while punishing those with balanced talents in multiple academic areas. This fact is troubling in itself, but even more worrisome in the context of the inequalities engendered by the test-preparation industry. Students with access to high-priced tutors are not only privy to knowledge about this quirk – the oddity is revealed nowhere in the New York City Department of Education’s official handbook for specialized schools – but enjoy tailor-made preparation strategies to exploit them. The SHSAT gives a strong math student with a savvy tutor the perverse incentive to neglect his English studies entirely in order to devote more time to acing the math portion of the test.

Strict equality

The blindfolded equality of the meritocracy argument is therefore less compelling in this context than it first appears. It reifies an impoverished concept of ‘merit’ – the results of a single test – and turns a blind eye to the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding and produced by the test. Perhaps Mike is right about one thing: maybe the problem is not with the test itself but with the very idea of selective institutions like Stuyvesant, schools that serve the interests of the city’s elite using public funds while the weakest students flounder below.

In the late 1960s, black community activists pressed unsuccessfully for radical change in the city’s school system, including the conversion of Stuyvesant, Bronx Science and Brooklyn Tech to open-admission schools. As a compromise, a new wrinkle (the ‘Discovery Program’) was instituted according to which members of underrepresented groups scoring just below the cutoff levels on the exams would be admitted to one of the specialized schools and given special preparation during the summer before the ninth grade. A few years later, in 1971, the New York State legislature passed the Hecht-Calandra Act to prevent Schools Chancellor Harvey Scribner – who had expressed some doubts about the SHSAT’s fairness and had ordered a commission of inquiry – from making any changes to the admissions procedures (Mac Donald, 1999). For the past two generations, the SHSAT has remained the sole determinant of admission to New York City’s prized schools. In 1995, when the matter heated up again, Chancellor Ramon Cortines established a
new Math-Science Institute (later renamed the Specialized Science High School Institute) to help prepare underprivileged seventh and eighth graders for the SHSAT (Newman, 1995). But eleven years later, some reports indicate that many of the students enrolling in the SSHI are white and Asian, and minority enrollments in the institute have dropped.

One might conclude from these failed attempts to boost black and Hispanic presence in the elite schools’ student bodies that the very existence of the schools is incompatible with a principle of equal concern and respect for all individuals. Using Rawls’s Difference Principle as a guide, for example, we would need to ask whether the inequalities in educational opportunity for New York City high school students redound to the benefit of students at the city’s lowest performing schools (Rawls, 2001: 42–3). Do the advantages enjoyed by the lucky ones – the scholars of Stuyvesant High – improve the lot of the least advantaged members of society? It is very hard to see how this might be the case.

As Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift have emphasized, education is a public good with both non-positional and positional attributes (Brighouse and Swift, 2006). In addition to the intrinsic benefits associated with having a good education – ‘the world of culture, complexity and enjoyment’ that learning opens for an individual (Brighouse and Swift, 2006: 482) – a degree from a school like Stuyvesant can open doors to an elite college and a promising career, as well as connections to future leaders in business, science and government. This means that winning a spot in the Stuyvesant ninth-grade class confers a significant competitive advantage on a young New Yorker that dramatically increases her odds of living a materially successful life. To bracket our doubts about the SHSAT for a moment, perhaps egalitarians should denounce the very idea of skimming the most talented off the top of the public school population. By identifying the top 1 per cent and gathering them together in a school with resources unmatched by any other in the system, New York City not only gives some a leg up – it hobbles others who are already struggling. ‘The competitive features of the goods in question’, write Brighouse and Swift, ‘give them a zero-sum aspect; the mere fact that some have more worsens the absolute position of those who have less’ (Brighouse and Swift, 2006: 477).

Despite the outcry that would surely result, then, perhaps the 1960s activists had the right idea: maybe the schools should indeed be democratized in the name of equality for all New York City public school students. William Koski and Rob Reich have proposed an equality standard for educational opportunity that may entail such a dramatic move (Koski and Reich, 2007a; Koski and Reich, 2007b). Drawing attention to the significant positionality of the good of education, Koski and Reich lament the shift in policy and rhetoric from ‘equality’ to ‘adequacy’ in educational opportunity. Whereas the Brown v.
Board of Education ruling and subsequent integration efforts held out an ideal of true equality for all students, the language of activists and legislators today has turned to standards and thresholds; the hope has been reduced to providing all students with an acceptable ‘minimum’ in their public schooling. The basic difficulty Koski and Reich find with the adequacy standard is its failure to appreciate the positional impact of education and its implicit approval of inequalities above a common standard. By setting a floor threshold for an adequate education and then permitting stunningly unequal educational opportunities above that threshold, the ‘sufficiency paradigm’ sells underprivileged students short. Students at failing high schools in the Bronx, for example, suffer not only because of their absolute deprivation (the insufficiency of their education) but also from their relative deprivation (the inequality of their education) when compared with students at Bronx High School of Science, one of New York’s handful of specialized schools.

The harms of inequality could be understood not only as material deprivation but as expressive disdain: they inflict ‘dignitary harms’ on those who attend the worst schools. And these harms stem not only from unequal public funds but from discrepancies in private funds raised by parent–teacher associations (PTAs) that enrich the facilities and course offerings of certain schools. Koski and Reich note that in 1998 an elementary school in Woodside, California, benefited from $3.3 million in privately raised funds – boosting per-student spending by over $7000 – while similar efforts in an Oakland school yielded only an extra $138 per child. ‘There is something insulting to our equal standing as citizens’, they argue, ‘when Woodside parents more than double per-pupil expenditures in their public school as compared to what is available in Oakland. The state is complicit in the infliction of dignitary harms, regardless of the level of material resources available to Oakland students’ (Koski and Reich, 2007b: 23).

Back on the other coast, we find a strikingly similar situation. Although the city spent a lot of money on its new quarters in the early 1990s, Stuyvesant does not receive a disproportionate share of New York’s public education funds. Its funding is based on roughly the same per-student allowance to which other public schools are entitled. But Stuyvesant parents take up the slack by raising significant sums for special projects in the school. Each year, the Stuyvesant High School Parents Association raises and spends over $400,000 to host receptions, fund student publications, pay for additional staff, lease copy machines and supply dozens of ‘wish list’ items ranging from Korean dictionaries to debate team travel to textbooks. No such extras are to be found at most of New York City’s other 230-odd public high schools. These striking inequalities in educational opportunity are no more palatable simply because some stem from the parents’ money rather than the city’s.

[17]
Democratic equality

The strict egalitarian case for dismantling New York City’s specialized high schools as we know them, however compelling, has holes. The first relates to the parental enrichment objection we just considered. When Koski and Reich write that ‘something insulting’ inheres in allowing PTAs to raise unequal supplementary funds for schools, their argument piggybacks on another intuition – that ‘there is something troubling about the use of public institutions, such as public schools, to deliver resources over and above the level of sufficiency’ (Koski and Reich, 2007b: 21–2). Something seems awry with both hunches.

Consider the case of Public School 321 in Park Slope, Brooklyn, consistently named one of the city’s best elementary schools. Like Stuyvesant, PS 321 has an active and committed parent association that raises a lot of money – music classes, band, chorus, and chess are all provided with PTA funds. The PTA leases a copier for the school, buys classroom rugs, pays the salary of a computer consultant and spends hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to make the school better for all of its students, nearly 40 per cent of whom are racial minorities and many of whom do not come from economically privileged homes. It seems wrong to ask the PTA to give up its fundraising efforts and to cease and desist in its efforts to enrich the curriculum and hire more teachers to decrease class sizes. The inequalities between PS 321 and some neighboring schools with poorer facilities and fewer opportunities are more than lamentable but, until the state is able to ‘level up’ the educational opportunities for all schools, it seems unwise to ‘level down’. Prohibiting PTA enrichment of PS 321 would make PS 321 into a worse school – that much is certain. The fallout from such a change would likely be even more serious, as well-off families would choose to send their kids to private schools in the neighborhood or migrate to the suburbs, leaving the urban public school system in greater trouble.

For similar reasons, closing Stuyvesant and the other elite public high schools in New York – or turning them into unscreened schools open to all applicants by lottery – would do a disservice to thousands of kids and bear little fruit in the quest for equal educational opportunity. Even Jonathan Kozol, one of the most outspoken activists in favor of the integration and improvement of America’s public schools, demurs from this extreme position. Kozol writes that the specialized schools ‘are intended to be enclaves of superior education, private schools essentially, within the public system’ (Kozol, 1992: 107). Yet he does not question ‘the value of the selective schools’ and clarifies ‘I am not proposing that such schools should simply not exist. Certain of these schools – New York’s Bronx High School of Science, for instance, Boston’s Latin School, and others – have distinguished histories and have made important contributions to American
Still, Kozol objects to the large gap that remains between the top schools and those on the bottom, and he worries that parents whose children earn a place in one of the jewels of the public school system will lose all motivation to push the city to improve educational resources for all (Kozol, 1992: 110).11

This is where the democratic egalitarian alternative comes in. In contrast to strict egalitarians, whose proposals risk dragging down educational opportunities for all while undermining the mission of the finest public schools, democratic egalitarians favor a ‘sufficientarian’ standard according to which all children deserve an education that is adequate for free and effective participation in social, civic and political life. This is no mean task – providing such an education would mean, at a minimum, improving resources and teacher quality significantly in schools that underperform, and aiming for much higher high school graduation rates and more widely available college preparatory curricula. It is difficult to take part effectively in the economy and in civil society without at least a decent high school education, and a democratic equality perspective would aim for standards necessary for every citizen’s full and effective functioning. Yet, contrary to theorists like Koski and Reich, education need not be strictly equalized on the grounds that it is a positional good to which all should have identical access. Differentiated educational programs that focus on a student’s particular skills and challenges pose no threat to egalitarian ideals. Elizabeth Anderson explains:

[Democratic equality guarantees not effective access to equal levels of functioning but effective access to levels of functioning sufficient to stand as an equal in society … it does not require literacy in any language other than English, nor the ability to interpret obscure works of literary theory. Democratic equality does not object if not everyone knows a foreign language, and only a few have a Ph.D.-level training in literature. (Anderson, 1999: 519)]

Anderson’s distinction between what is necessary and what is permissible in the pursuit of equality gives us the outline of an argument for programs and even entire schools designed to challenge and develop the talents of gifted students. As long as a school system provides a sufficient education to allow everyone to ‘stand as an equal in society’, it may provide additional or special instruction to those who would benefit from higher-level studies.

Of the justifications that have been offered for gifted educational programs, some point to the expected societal benefits of developing highly able students’ talents while others focus on the moral responsibility of realizing the potential of gifted children and helping them to flourish as individuals. One version of the first kind of justification may be located in a Rawlsian framework: if we can expect more creative and highly skilled scientists, philosophers, artists and engineers to emerge from an educational system that develops
the talents of the gifted, society as a whole (including its least advantaged members) may expect to benefit from their work. (This argument turns on an empirical assumption that may or may not hold true.) The second kind of justification is that which Michael Merry has in mind when he writes that ‘gifted children deserve to be adequately challenged as much as anyone else … their ability to flourish hinges on it’ (Merry, 2007: 65). Once the idea of separate education is established, there is the question of whether it is justified to spend more public money on highly able students. Bruce Baker makes a case for this conclusion. Taking issue with the perception that ‘“gifted children can make it on their own” without supplemental resources’, Baker cites numerous studies demonstrating that ‘differentiated opportunities’ are crucial to the ‘cognitive and affective development’ of gifted students (Baker, 2001: 229–30). Gifted students, like students with learning disabilities, require individualization of their learning programs. Baker concludes that ‘appropriately serving the needs of gifted children requires resources, which come at additional costs that are quantifiable within a resource-cost model framework’. If, however, the currently popular standards-based method for education budgeting is to be applied, the costs will be calculated in a way that precludes any extra funding for gifted students. That is, if the only goal of the educational system is to bring every student up to a minimum level of achievement, far less money need be spent on more talented children (Baker, 2001: 230–1). According to standards-based analysis, gifted children should actually receive less funding than the average student and a great deal less than the least able students. But if Baker’s claims about the special needs of gifted students are valid, a funding solution of this sort is unwise, if not unjust. Students with severe learning disabilities remain the neediest and most costly group to educate on this model, but gifted students may merit supplemental funds as well.

CONCLUSION

Whatever justification we find to be most persuasive for educating gifted students differently, the question of identification remains. Who qualifies for the special educational opportunities? How should we determine which students populate schools like Stuyvesant High?

A defensible theory of egalitarian justice does not demand that excellent public schools like Stuyvesant High School should be closed. Nor does it make the case for eliminating selective admissions standards. I have argued that these changes to the status quo are unnecessary and may even be antithetical to egalitarian premises. But the racial composition of the student bodies at these schools is another matter, one that a theory of political and social equality should find intolerable. The fact that fewer than 20 black students are found in
Stuyvesant’s 800-person ninth-grade class represents a clear injustice in New York City’s public education system; it is an indictment of the admissions policy that makes it possible. As Gary Orfield noted in response to the findings of extreme racial disparities in New York City’s high schools, ‘I don’t think someone would want to hire somebody just on the basis of a test score, and we don’t admit them to a great college on the basis of a test score, and we shouldn’t admit them to a great high school on that basis’ (Quoted in Gootman, 2006). The problems with the SHSAT as the single determinant of admission to New York’s elite schools go beyond its cramped conception of merit and its socioeconomic bias toward wealthy and well-connected families. Injustices against individual students are only the beginning of the problem.

The more pervasive crisis is the impact of segregated public schools on the possibility of healthy democracy years down the line. The finest schools should be regarded as more than institutions for tapping individual students’ potential and delivering them up to elite colleges and careers. Academic preparation is not the sole function of the public school. These schools also nurture future leaders in business, science, the arts and government – fields that exist, in various ways, to serve the public. To churn out graduating classes from elite schools with only a handful of blacks and Hispanics is to reproduce and exacerbate the very inequalities that helped to keep most students of color in less demanding schools in the first place. ‘Elites must be so constituted that they will effectively serve all sectors of society, not just themselves,’ Elizabeth Anderson writes. ‘They must perform in their offices so that the inequalities in power, autonomy, responsibility, and reward they enjoy in virtue of their position redound to the benefit of all, inducing the least advantaged’ (Anderson, 2007: 596). Elites are much more likely to understand the needs of underserved communities and to be responsive to them if some of their ranks come from these segments of the population and if they grew to know people from diverse backgrounds in an intimate classroom setting during their formative years.

It follows that a multifaceted admissions policy that is more thoughtful and more nuanced than a single-test policy is essential for public institutions like New York City’s specialized high schools. Any educational program that offers a scarce resource should be generous in its conception of merit and steadfast in its commitment to broader social goals. Racial and socioeconomic integration of all social institutions, including schools – and elite schools perhaps most of all – should be a priority for those who care about democracy.

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NOTES

1. Of the nearly 400 public high schools in New York City, nine are ‘specialized schools’. Eight of these, including Stuyvesant, accept students based solely on a standardized admissions exam; the ninth, LaGuardia High School of Music & Arts and Performing Arts, requires an audition for admission.


4. Voters in California, Texas, Florida and Michigan have ratified ballot measures banning the use of race in college admissions. See Lewin (2007).


6. In Levittown v. Nyquist (1982), the New York State Court of Appeals held that New York’s Constitution did not require equal funding of public schools but did require a ‘sound basic education’ including ‘the basic literacy, calculating, and verbal skills necessary to enable children to eventually function productively as civic participants capable of voting and serving on a jury’

7. This is the language in the education articles of several state constitutions, including New Jersey and Kentucky.

8. Some of the discussion in this paragraph is indebted to Scheffler’s reading of Rawls.

9. Criticism of Herrnstein and Murray’s methodology and conclusions is legion; two notable texts are Gould (1996) and Kincheloe et al. (1997).

10. I say ‘may’ because Koski and Reich do not settle on a single method for putting the equality ideal into practice; at any rate, the conclusion is not inconsistent with their argument.

11. Rob Reich made a similar point to me in an email exchange, using Hirschman’s (2007) Exit, Voice and Loyalty analysis to argue that parents who can effectively ‘exit’ the poor conditions of the public schools by voluntarily enriching them will have little reason to assert their ‘voice’ within the public system for its general betterment. But this kind of ‘exit’, if it makes sense to call it that, is perhaps the best that could be hoped for: it results in tangible improvements in public schools for all attending students. No such benefits would flow from ‘exit’ properly so-called, in which parents abandon the public schools for private schools or the suburbs.
A consensus is emerging that the standardized tests used for university admission in the United States are weak indicators of academic talent, reflect racial and socioeconomic biases, and fail to predict academic performance of students once in college. The National Association for College Admission Counseling recently released a report criticizing the SAT and ACT on these and other grounds and urging schools to consider abandoning them as a requirement for admission. A similar problem plagues the use of standardized tests for very young children. As an ironic result of a New York City effort to identify more minority gifted students for kindergarten and first grade through a new standardized process, students in the poorest neighborhoods in the city lost gifted classes in 2008 while nearly 40 per cent of the seats were concentrated in the city’s wealthiest (and whitest) districts. Critics cite the city’s exclusive reliance on standardized tests as the cause. See NACAC (2008) and Gootman (2008).

An example: Bard High School Early College, where I teach, provides a secondary and two-year college education to a broadly diverse group of New York City students in a public school setting. It admits students based on a holistic evaluation of applicants’ talents, motivation and academic curiosity, using middle school grades, teacher recommendations, scores on written assessments in writing and math, and personal interviews. An admissions policy of this type takes more time and costs more money than a single-shot, one-test approach, but is essential for a school system that seeks to allocate its educational resources effectively and equitably.

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**Biographical Note**

Steven V. Mazie (PhD, University of Michigan, AB Harvard College) is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Bard High School Early College in Manhattan. His areas of research include qualitative research methods, religion and politics, consent theory and the Amish, and rationality and democracy. He has published articles in *Polity, Perspectives on Politics, Field Methods, Review of Faith and International Affairs* and the *New York Times*. Mazie’s first book, *Israel’s Higher Law: Religion and Liberal Democracy in the Jewish State*, was published in 2006. [email: smazie@bard.edu]