The "Egalitarian Paradox" Reconsidered: A Comment on Emerson*

Ivan DeFaveri
university of alberta

In a recent article, Emerson (1979) argues that the egalitarian position in public education is untenable because the egalitarian commits himself to paradoxical utterances. When the oddity of his position is pointed out, the best the egalitarian can do is offer "compromises designed to avoid exacerbating" (p. 56) the paradox, but the paradox remains. The paradox allegedly arises in the following manner: Equal treatment of all students will, because of individual differences among students, actually increase the differences among them. The result will then be a violation of the egalitarianism he subscribes to. On the other hand, attempting to bring about equal results among his students could be done only by treating them differently, but this also violates the egalitarianism he subscribes to. Either way, he acts contrary to his own principles. A further argument has it that the public schools ought not to pursue egalitarianism, because doing so thwarts excellence and encourages mediocrity.

I want to show that the egalitarianism Emerson criticizes is a caricature of the mainstream of egalitarian thought as it has emerged in our society, and that those who have been taken seriously as egalitarians — whether liberal egalitarians such as R. H. Tawney or H. J. Laski, to name only two, or socialist egalitarians, such as Karl Marx or Frederic Engels, to name just two — have not held principles as simplistic as this. Secondly, I want to show that the position such people do hold can be stated in non-paradoxical terms.

Emerson considers "two main approaches" that egalitarians take. He is convinced that the egalitarian must choose one or possibly both of these alternatives but no third option is available to him. Either choice, it is argued, is equally conclusive against him. The first of these he calls the "equal treatment for all" approach. But as soon as we recognize that children are different to begin with, "it is either impossible or unwise, or both, to offer equal treatment to all students" (p. 54). To do so would ignore individual needs and individual differences and, possibly, magnify existing differences. The very program advocated on egalitarian principles will itself defeat the egalitarianism being advocated.

*This comment is made on a previously published article by Goldwin J. Emerson, "The Egalitarian Paradox in Public Education," *Canadian Journal of Education*, 1979, *4*(3), 53-59.

Emerson does recognize that some will argue that equal treatment in cases where people differ may not mean identical treatment. But the only alternative he considers at this point is that equal treatment will mean spending "an equal amount of time and effort" on each student. Against this he argues that it has the disadvantage of being unfair to those who have the greatest need and concludes that we can thereby see that "the idea of equal treatment for all may in the end be a callous principle" (p. 55).

But such an interpretation of the "equal but different" principle misconstrues what is central to serious egalitarian thought, namely, that each should be shown equality of concern. This formulation Emerson quite ignores. Now there are many ways in which equality of concern (or respect, or consideration) may be manifested, and spending exactly the same time and effort on each student, while sometimes precisely the right thing to do, will at other times actually violate the principle. A doctor shows his patients equality of concern only by spending more time and effort with those whose illnesses are more serious and more intractable than those who are easily cured. To give to each according to his need is fundamental to egalitarian thought as Marx and others have insisted. Thus, "equal treatment for all," when seen as advocating equal concern for all, is the exact opposite of a callous principle. Indeed, it is formulated precisely to take individual differences into account. As Tawney (1931) says,

> The more anxiously, indeed, a society endeavours to secure equality of consideration for all its members, the greater will be the differentiation of treatment which, when once their common human needs have been met, it accords to the special needs of different groups and individuals among them. (p. 50)

Thus, extra help for some is a way of bringing about the kind of society the egalitarian wants, and is not a violation of egalitarian principles at all. Extra time and effort and resources spent on those with learning disabilities may be appropriate because only then will they be able to participate in our common culture. At the same time, extra time and effort and resources spent on those with superior inherited abilities may be needed to show them equality of concern.

The second of the two main attempts to accommodate egalitarian thought in education, according to Emerson, is that of "equal objectives for all." Proponents of this view, he tells us, insist on a set curriculum for all, and the mastery of certain basic skills by everyone. Emerson has two arguments against this view. First, such an enterprise will frustrate the bright students and thus the principle of equal objectives for all "turns out to be a principle of mediocrity" (p. 56). Second, those who advance this position assume there is agreement as to what the common basic skills ought to be, but this is not the case. To hold such a belief is to "run counter to the opinions of many notable educational philosophers, from Aristotle to John Dewey, who claim that the goals of education must of necessity

remain open-ended if education is to be an ongoing search for truth" (p. 56).

These arguments rest on the assumption that the egalitarian actually advocates a state of affairs where people are as alike as possible, and everyone's educational attainments are to be as alike as possible. But those who argue for a common curriculum or a basic curriculum for all do not actually advocate identical results for all. They are advocating, rather, a certain minimum attainment for all so that competent citizenship will be within everyone's reach and communication among people in a common language will be made possible. After this certain commonality has been attained, serious egalitarians have insisted that those who can develop further should be able to do so; if they were not, no equality of concern would be shown them. "One law for the lion and the ox is tyranny," as William Blake so eloquently said. Neither the principle of equality nor the principle of equality of opportunity need to be seen to be demanding identical results. The egalitarian may strive for identical results in regard to some things: He may want everyone to be perfectly healthy, he may want everyone to be happy, he may want everyone to be fulfilled. But in regard to many other things, he is willing to allow differences to flourish. What the egalitarian objects to is not the existence of differences among people, but unjustified differences, and undeserved advantages, as happens when concern is made a function of such things as wealth, class, or sex. Perhaps somewhere there are people who want all to be as alike as possible, and are advocating a society of hermaphrodites, but a social and political movement cannot be discredited just because it has a lunatic fringe. If so, which would survive?

Thus, it is as misleading to say that the egalitarian wants everyone to be as alike as possible as to say that the non-egalitarian wants everyone to be as different as possible. The egalitarian who is of interest to educators cannot be characterized as wanting people to be identical in regard to educational attainments, but rather as wanting the differences in such attainments to be justified; further, he tends to find many of the present differences capricious. Similarly, he does not want identical status given to all positions, but wants the differences in status to be justified; further, he tends to find many such existing differences in status irresponsible. He does not want all people to have equal authority or equal power in all areas, but is opposed to unjustified differences in authority and power; further, he tends to find many examples of such unjustified differences around him. And so on.

So then it is a different conception of what counts as a justified difference that characterizes such a person and distinguishes him from other social theorists. He is recognized by the characteristic judgments he makes, by a typical set of responses regarding how people should treat each other, and not by reference to a fixed ideal that no one has seriously wanted.

Egalitarian thought that has been taken seriously by social theorists and that has influenced social welfare programs in Canada and elsewhere, far from being a Procrustean bed on which all are supposed to lie, or as the attempt to attain an "ideal" universally found unpalatable, is best seen as an evolving cluster of related ideas. The same is true of most fundamental terms in social and political philosophy. The word "liberal," for example, has no meaning which is both simple and precise; rather it represents a set of characteristic beliefs about such things as freedom, authority, and the common good, each of which reflects specific but varying sociopolitical conditions. Nineteenth-century British liberalism was different from nineteenth-century French liberalism; both differ from twentieth-century Canadian liberalism. Similarly, the Levellers, recognized as egalitarians in the seventeenth century, held views about private property that would be called conservative today. Thus, in discussing egalitarian thought we are talking primarily about a matter of emphasis, and this characteristic emphasis will reflect a social, political, and historical context.

As was noted, everything depends on what counts as a justified difference, and egalitarians may differ among themselves, as well as from non-egalitarians, as to what judgments ought to be made in regard to specific issues. But egalitarian thought, as opposed to some other kind of thought, is recognizable by certain typical features. The following list is not meant to be exhaustive, but only to provide a general orientation:

1. The egalitarian tends to set the minimum level of well-being below which no one should be allowed to fall, somewhat higher than would the non-egalitarian. In an educational context, the most obvious manifestation of this concern is the insistence on universal literacy and an emphasis on a certain level of educational provisions being available to all.

2. The egalitarian tends to think that no child at birth deserves better chances than any other child. Thus he will tend to find offensive any social arrangement that favors one child over another. This is one manifestation of his commitment to equality of concern for new-born children. At the same time, he tends to favor equality of sacrifice among all individuals and all groups in cases where it is appropriate that each should promote the common good.

3. The egalitarian tends to think it is suspect to reward a person for things over which he has no control, for example, his inherited abilities — whether great or little — whereas he is willing to reward people for their efforts in regard to things over which they do have control. By the same token, the egalitarian tends to feel — more so than does the average person — that no one should suffer as a result of things over which he has no control. Thus he will be more likely than most to compensate those born with inherited deficiencies, and those victimized by oppressive social conditions.

4. The egalitarian tends to believe, in regard to equality of opportunity, that each should be allowed to flourish in his own way, provided that certain moral criteria are satisfied. Thus each should be given the opportunity to develop whatever worthwhile talents he has, regardless of how limited. But at the same time he realizes that each should be given an equal opportunity to compete for those prizes which are necessarily limited. Thus it is unfair for the rich to have greater opportunities to become educated than the poor.

Sometimes the various elements of egalitarian thought pull in different directions, and a judgment has to be made between them. The egalitarian's desire to have each new-born baby shown equality of concern may run counter to the deeply rooted belief among many parents that they should be able to give their children the benefits of their superior education and material well-being. Although such a practice gives undeserved advantages to some children, he recognizes that the parents must also be shown equality of concern in their attempts to satisfy their deeply felt needs. That the egalitarian is here torn between contradictory tendencies is not, however, a paradox; it only means that not all good things are possible simultaneously. Typically the egalitarian will emphasize the need to give children equal chances and underplay the psychological satisfactions of transmitting property to one's children, most likely on the grounds that the wealth was accumulated in a manner which offended other egalitarian principles. But here the egalitarian — just as the liberal, just as the conservative — will have to try for as much of each of his ideals as is practicable. It may not be possible to announce ahead of time just how he will strike a balance between the various elements of his thought but this judgment, when made, regardless of whether others agree with it, can be stated in coherent terms and directed toward non-paradoxical ends. Emerson's egalitarian, I conclude, is a straw man, unrepresentative of serious egalitarian thought.

REFERENCES

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Ivan DeFaveri is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E1.