Retrieving Justice in Educational Research

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1. Can educational research pose its own questions of justice?

With arguments grounded in scholarship involving various methodologies and drawing upon diverse sets of data, educational researchers have no shortage of disagreement regarding how best to pursue justice in educational institutions, policies, and practices. For some factions, this work entails engaging questions of adequacy or equality, either in access or across a broad range of outcomes (Brighouse, 2002) (Satz, 2007) (Terzi, 2008). For others, it may require appropriate forms of recognition, diversity, or meaningful reductions of prejudice (New & Merry, 2014). Of course, many accounts resist even these general categorizations. Despite these differences in detail, this field of study seems to count the desirability of justice in education as a universally held premise, a unifying point upon which these disparate voices can agree.

But does this sense of general agreement rest upon a conceptual ambiguity? Might the research community’s purportedly universal call for justice in education be even more heterogeneous than expected, constituting many different and, in some cases, incompatible registers of inquiry? Besides the aforementioned differences in detail related to the pursuit of justice in education, might educational researchers be pursuing entirely different types of justice? When the concept of “justice” is invoked in educational contexts, do researchers and policymakers mean to suggest a set of, inter alia, moral, economic, social, or political understandings, or something else completely? Indeed, confusion about justice in education stymies the very valuable and urgent work done in response to unjust educational circumstances, broadly defined. Attention to conceptions of justice in educational research ought to have rather concrete and demonstrable effects in the work of policy makers, educators, and community members, to say nothing of the lived experiences of students.

These varied views of justice are due in no small part to the fact that educational research often rests upon external disciplinary approaches, their structures altered and assumptions refined in light of the educational questions posed. Educational researchers conduct, for example, economic research on education, asking how education affects or is impacted by market concerns. Or, perhaps, they ask political or moral questions of justice relative to educational institutions or activities. While work of this sort certainly accomplishes very meaningful results and insight, in order to remain true to its discipline it must leave some elements of its analysis intact and unchanged. Even though some adjustments and alterations are made, educational researchers studying justice find themselves employing the tools, methods, and understandings of disciplines that are, ceteris paribus, generally ambivalent to the unique core of the educational enterprise. It is no wonder, then, that multiple species of justice, imported from various disciplines of study, are expressed through educational research. In light of these ambiguities, this paper asks whether educational researchers can articulate understandings of justice without reference to other fields of study. This is to ask, independent of political theory, sociology, moral philosophy, or the like, can education qua education, a potential discipline unto itself, pose questions of justice? What conceptual groundwork might that endeavor require?

Robbie McClintock’s excavation of a historically waylaid concept, formative justice, may serve as an entry point into distinctly educational questions in research and
practice. This paper focuses on political approaches to research on education and argues that the distinction between formative and distributive justice is useful for a richer understanding of the latter. Once understood well in relation to particular political and ethical theories, formative justice is clearly a category of theorizing about justice rather than a particular theory itself. By highlighting the formative core of this category of justice, I advance a distinctly educational, liberal theory of formative justice (justice as preservation), which I assert can be normatively useful for research in education, understood as an independent discipline of study.

2. Formative justice as distinct from distributive justice

In a recent essay, Charles Larmore states that the standard definition of justice, “giving everyone [their] due”, is unhelpful in detailing why work on that concept might differ when engaged under the banner of one or another field of study (Larmore, 2013, p. 377). Larmore asks whether political philosophy is a branch of moral philosophy, borrowing freely from that larger field’s sense of what one is due, or if it might be an independent field worthy of its own status with unique approaches to answering that core question of justice. Similarly, educational scholars would do well to ask whether investigations into justice in education are part of some larger, potentially non-educational, project or if these inquiries constitute a distinct enterprise. If the latter is true, educational researchers have grounds for relocating research on education amongst a constellation of multiple independent disciplines, asking new questions of education towards new solutions to problems that may have previously seemed intractable or ineffable.

Against a backdrop of research in education in which justice is often expressed as a political ideal, Robbie McClintock’s account of formative justice serves as a candidate for a uniquely educational genre of justice. Towards delineating the impact of this approach and providing a fuller appreciation of how the idea of formative justice challenges a good number of assumptions about justice in educational research, a sense of the current conceptual landscape is necessary. For that purpose, this paper offers an example of a socio-political distributive approach to justice, John Rawls’ ‘justice as fairness’, as representative of one of the types of justice theorizing that has exerted major influence upon educational policy and research in recent decades. An attention to crucial differences between the categories of formative and distributive justice highlights what each can accomplish, suggesting the need for distinctly educational, alongside sociopolitical and moral, scholarship on education.

Distributive Justice – the example of justice as fairness

Understood broadly, theories of distributive justice are concerned with the allocation of advantages or goods in a society. While there are certainly many approaches to distributive justice, a focus upon Rawls’ account of its criteria offers entry to a wide range of them. Rawls’ political philosophical work on justice has had considerable impact upon the general movements of that broad area of scholarship during the last half-century (Nussbaum, 2001). Due to the scope of that influence, the distributive elements of his project have found their way into various domains of study, including research on education. For present purposes, a simplified overview of the theory and its application to education is in order.
Rawls’ theory of justice, known as ‘justice as fairness’, focuses upon the “basic structure of society; or more exactly, it details the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (Rawls, 1999, p. 6). Of course, rather than making a strongly metaphysical, in this case liberal, claim about the nature of the good and what people are owed, Rawls (1985) (1993) clarifies that his project ought not be taken to reflect a comprehensive moral view. Instead, the project is a work of ‘political liberalism’ and, as such, only attends to political dimensions of consideration. Under a charitable read, this political distributive focus seeks security against the possibility that allocations may be based in arbitrary criteria established by biased architects of the system of distribution. As safeguard against this, Rawls turns to a thought experiment in which persons occupy an “original position”, behind a “veil of ignorance”.

Rawls envisions the original position as an initial, pre-social context, a theoretical perspective from which rational, self-interested parties, with a specific set of beliefs and interests, would choose principles to guide their socio-political systems of organization and advantage. Contemplating the likely deliberations and decisions made by parties in this situation, he asserts that one can detect the rudiments of a social contract theory and that this contract can be made more reasonable under a condition of impartiality, i.e., ‘the veil of ignorance’ (Rawls, 1999). This hypothetical guide limits the likelihood that persons will endorse biased, self-serving structures. The veil of ignorance shrouds one’s knowledge of one’s particular characteristics, thus removing the temptation to legislate towards one’s extreme benefit. Although they will know that they each have a sense of justice and a rational capacity for a conception of the good, “no one knows [one’s] place in society, [one’s] class position or social status, nor does any one know [one’s] fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, [one’s] intelligence, strength and the like. [Rawls] even assume[s] that the parties do not know their conceptions of the good or their special psychological propensities” (Rawls, 1999, p. 11). Along with this concern that the project will be contaminated by unchecked self-promotion, Rawls also wishes to bracket those “contingencies and accidents” that would shade the process of political principle creation as well as to ensure that we do not smuggle into the initial situation the very same sort of principles that we expect to find as results (Rawls, 1975).

Rawls’ attempt to determine a reasonable conception of democratic social institutions for free and equal persons bearing relatively diverse characteristics under a plurality of circumstances, inter alia, looks towards “primary social goods” as the units of comparison under the aegis of justice (Rawls, 1982). Rawls lists the primary social goods as: basic liberties; freedom of movement and occupation; positions of responsibility and powers of office; income and wealth; and the social bases of self-respect (Rawls, 2001, p. 59).

Rawls holds that these social primary goods are those social effects that persons (as he stipulates them) would desire irrespective of their particular contexts and constitutions. Under the original position, Rawls’ hypothetical legislating persons would have reason to avoid an inordinate concentration of these goods, given their ignorance of their own particularities. Quite simply, as they do not know their position in the social structures, they would avoid crafting a structure with undue concentrations of undesirable disadvantage, i.e., a dearth of social primary goods (Rawls, 1982).
These primary goods are to be allocated according to the principles of justice that Rawls imagines parties in the original position behind the veil of ignorance would endorse. These principles ensure basic liberties for all, fair equality of opportunity, and that any socioeconomic inequality be directed towards the benefit of the least well-off members of society. While Rawls carefully attempts to avoid bias in the creation of these principles and their identified subjects, some partiality may have bled through the work. Issues of gender and race potentially complicate Rawls’ work, calling into question his conclusions and their scope. But these and similar leanings (of the sort that might be identified as faults) are not the only limitations of the framework.

Educational work engaging justice through a solely distributive socio-political approach can only ask questions of sociopolitical elements and functions in analyses of education. Essentially, distributive theories ask: What is a justifiable distribution of resources? Responding to this question, distributive methods and conclusions are often brought to bear on education as a portion of the larger project of safeguarding rights, shoring up the foundations of political participation, and much more.

For instance, the theory of justice as fairness might answer the distributive questions by analyzing education as an analogue to primary goods, such that scholarship on the right to education might draw upon arguments that conceive of potential students as free and equal persons deserving of the promises of the social contract. On the basis of this right, access to educational institutions and experiences of a sufficient quality would be a very pressing concern of justice in education (Fullinwider & Lichtenberg, 2006) (Johnston, 2012). Is access to education fairly distributed? Are inequalities in educational systems burdening or benefitting the least advantaged?

Of course, the adherents to justice as fairness might also respond to the question of distributive justice by analyzing education as an indispensable avenue towards the primary goods necessary for political, civic, and/or economic participation. Under this view, justice in education requires that potential workers and citizens be educated in pursuit of these societal outcomes. Educational efforts need to make rather strong claims, potentially at odds with privately held perspectives, but these might be justified as limited political claims in the service of maintaining a just system (Costa, 2011) (Fowler, 2011) (Neufeld, 2013). Are students learning the skills of civic participation? Are they being prepared for social mobility via employment options or are schools calcifying intergenerational social class distinctions by preparing students for fixed social positions?

As two approaches amongst many, these questions, analyses, and the broader scholarship they represent are incredibly useful for asserting the value of education in ensuring that each person receives what she is socially and politically due, but they do not clearly engage education qua education. In this sense, they cannot answer the question of what a person is, solely educationally, due.

Fundamentally, distributive projects, such as those forwarded under justice as fairness and its ilk, are political projects. That is to say, this field of scholarship is chiefly concerned with the interactions between members of a society as they organize and allocate the advantages attached to their status as citizens engaged in a collective project. Their treatment of education sees it largely as a factor in those political goals. As such, they cannot be expected to address issues beyond the political matters identified at the outset of the theory and contained in, for example, the list of social primary goods and the principles guiding their allocations. The theory does not encompass a broader collection
of spheres of human action and, as such, is arguably blind to those features of a life lived “whole”, those elements not captured in the charted distribution of goods (McClintock, 2015).

**Formative Justice – an emerging alternative category**

Towards addressing related issues, Robbie McClintock (2015) sharply notes the core distinction between distributive and formative justice in that he casts the former as, perhaps, the regulative principle of politics and the latter as performing the very same role for education (McClintock, 2015). With this insightful comparison serving as foundation, a few points on formative justice – relevant to establishing its ability to serve as foundation for purely educational inquiries into justice – are provided below.

For almost a decade, McClintock has carefully established the contours of a conception of formative justice with some vigor – though he is clear to note that the concept is a quite ancient one (McClintock, 2005) (2012) (2015). In study of Plato’s Republic, McClintock avoids the disciplinary determinism that would bind the ideas of the text to specific spheres of knowledge. Though its study has largely been pursued through the disciplines that the academy has come to call political philosophy or political theory, McClintock reads this foundational text to contain vital, non-political notions (Mintz, 2015). Freed from disciplinary expectations, this reading recovers a concept embedded in a potential discipline of study that would remain otherwise lost to academe.

McClintock observes the aforementioned distinction, noting that:

> Issues of justice arise when a need or desire for something exceeds its supply, forcing deliberation about what each recipient is due. Issues of distributive justice stem from having to allocate a finite supply of public goods among a larger multiplicity of claimants. Issues of formative justice have to do, not with public goods, but with human potentials. In education, possibilities exceed feasible achievement, forcing choices [...]. By exercising formative justice, a person selects among possibilities and allocates a finite supply of talent and energy, of motivation and discernment, in pursuing these chosen goals. Formative justice thereby determines the mix of potentials that a person or group will effectively act to achieve. (McClintock, 2012, p. 176)

In this distinction, McClintock gives a general view on justice while also separating political and educational species of the concept. This distinction also sees him identifying an underexplored sphere of action: intentionality. In considering the lived experiences of persons or groups who are exerting their will relative to selecting and acting towards goals of valued meanings or principle, McClintock distances himself from procedural questions of politics in order to promote questions of potential. Rather than an inquiry conducted in the field of morality, such as educational questions of moral development, he directs our attentions to a distinction between living well and living justly. This nuanced distinction invites his audience to conduct and appreciate inquiries on an otherwise obscured register of personal (or persons grouped and acting as a collective) becoming.
Though they are distinct, distributive and formative justice are not wholly independent of one another. McClintock contrasts formative justice with its distributive cousin through the example of a professional sports team:

The front office deals with distributive justice, at least within the tiny universe of the team, in negotiating salaries and other terms of player contracts. The issue of distributive justice here [...] is to justify differentials in compensation, working with the players and their agents to achieve agreement through judgments about the market, putative skill, drawing power, and other measures of worth [...] If the distribution is astute, the team, its officials, players, and fans all might thrive. But will it do so?

This question raises the issue of formative justice. By itself, a great collection of talent, richly remunerated, may achieve consistent success [...], but it does not guarantee it. Team members, working with a coaching staff, must use principles of formative justice to help each player reach his full potential and to integrate them all into a resourceful, winning team. The issue here is to get each player into optimum condition for the roles he has to play, to build the élan and determination of the group so that each plays with full intensity, and to develop and communicate to the team and to each constituent player an astute game plan that takes into account the [...] unique capacities of key personnel. Finally, formative justice here consists in putting all these activities together, each in its proper measure, so that on the day of the crucial game, the whole team is shrewd together, winning in a commanding performance [...]. (McClintock, 2012, pp. 176-178)

This illustration quite powerfully conveys the view that, while the distribution of resources surely has effect upon the formative activity of the team, it would be shortsighted to think that distributive considerations are sufficient for engaging the work of the coaching staff, or that formative activities are solely a portion of distributive efforts. If anything, it may make more sense to invert that relationship and think of formative justice as entailing distributive concerns – the formation of a winning team may require fair compensation as the alternative may result in a greater likelihood that team members disengage from the pursuit of collective goals (McClintock, 2015, p. 11).

For McClintock, formative justice is “the basic problem of acting justly, controlling the activities of self-formation by a person or a collectivity, deciding how to conduct one’s life” (McClintock, 2015, p. 7). He goes on to state that:

[principles of formative justice regulate, implicitly or explicitly, activities through which people work out their controlling purposes, intentions, potentials, and possibilities, and develop their capacities, perceptive and active, with which they can pursue their intents [...]]. Attention, intelligence, and energy are finite, while urges, desires, needs, and aspirations are manifold and exceed capacities to bring them to fulfillment. Hence, all people all the time must exercise formative justice in the course of self-organizing their lives. (McClintock, 2015, p. 7).

These efforts, to do more than simply live well, require persons (or collectivities) to live justly by selecting goals well and acting in accordance with their aims.
McClintock outlines a conception of justice that breaks from analyses of actualities (what has been or is now the case) in favor of an awareness of one’s management of one’s potentialities (what is possible). While similar to elements of human development measures of justice that focus upon capabilities, formative justice attends to how persons come to form selves in possession of a specific menu of potentials. If capabilities refer to what a person is able to “do or be”, formative justice attends to capacities, or potentials, as organized and pursued with intention. Though a hasty reading may tempt an equivocation, formative justice should not be conflated with other scholarly projects. Rather than taking its potentials as a metric of a larger theory of justice, McClintock’s formative justice stands poised to serve as a full category of theorizing.

In the category of formative justice, educational queries abound. Questions of becoming and development emerge in all purposeful activity (McClintock, 2015, p. 11); educational responses to these are unavoidable. As distributive theories of justice ask for justification of a distribution of resources, formative justice poses an accessible lattice of questions upon which persons organize their activities towards formation. In engaging these questions, persons enact the intentionality that is critical to McClintock’s account of formative justice. Formative justice asks: Is a particular goal of formation desirable, intellectually or otherwise? How does that goal compare to other potentialities, many of which may need to be neglected in its pursuit? Can the desired results be achieved given the available characteristics or traits upon which actors might draw? Might establishing sub-goals, attending to those characteristics and capacities, be necessary? These questions, and many like them, are only the beginning of a formative engagement with purposeful activity.

While these educational questions of formative justice may seem clear as a structure in which to house ideas about one’s educational efforts towards just living, how ought they be engaged in distinctly educational research? That is to ask: is it enough to present the questions, or does formative justice need to provide answers to them as well?

To be of interest as an active portion (rather than only a subject) of research, the formative approach may need to do more than simply pose its questions to persons or groups. After all, if distributive justice were to assert only that persons would do well to consider how resources are distributed, we might opine on whether that category of justice is important, but could be rather confident of its unhelpfulness as a full-bodied research framework upon which to hang very productive normative claims. Similarly, to serve as a tool for educational researchers, formative justice may need to begin answering the questions it poses, or at the very least embed itself in a structure that guides our engagement with those queries. For instance: While we might agree that aims ought to be selected, how can groups educationally justify their particular formative goals? For these groups, are goals selected through deliberation educationally better than those asserted by some despot? For persons, should components of one’s intent be united in that selection of a pursuit or, for example, could one’s intellect legitimately drive that selection even at the expense of the demands of one’s emotion? Can one err in choosing particular purposes or principles? How could some external observing party recognize that error at the time of selection? Or, is it only an error in retrospect, after one shifts her views about what is or was desirable?
These questions are relatively difficult to engage, as too weak a response leaves us with very little ground gained over the initial statement of the existence of a category of formative justice; upon only this basis, educational research would have considerable difficulty in supporting a widespread invocation of formative justice. Still, offering too strong or specific a response to the full category of formative justice would be a mistake as it suggests an overly normative, perhaps bluntly metaphysical, far-reaching proclamation of what persons or groups ought to become. Deeply metaphysical claims of detailed universal standards of formative justice run counter to the engagement with intentionality, with selecting one’s own purposes, that is at the core of McClintock’s (2015) account of the concept. Surely, there must be some way to engage the content of formative justice without eroding the context for one’s intentionality in the selection of principles or purposes.

One very worthwhile solution would be to advance particular theories of formative justice. Having identified the existence of this category of justice, we can now begin the exciting work of giving it content. Rather than pressing for formative justice as a species of justice offering clear recommendations, it ought to be regarded as a category in which recommendations can be organized. Said differently, as distributive justice can take many forms, Rawls’ justice as fairness being one conceptualization amongst many, we might take formative justice to be a (presently) sparsely populated category of justice, rather than a particular theory. Towards articulating one defensible account among many possibilities, I engage the aforementioned metaphysical problem, asserting a solution that extends McClintock’s work in novel ways and suggests a particular and productive formative theory, justice as preservation, arguably of real use to normative research in education.

3. Educational liberalism as a foundation for a theory of formative justice

In asking how we might best navigate the formative questions placed before us in McClintock’s account of this category of justice, it is clear that some serious (and recursive) work needs to be done. How does one select which capacities (i.e., strengths, skills, knowledge, experiences, etc…) will be useful or even required in the very selection of capacities? Rather than reflecting an arbitrary criterion, these questions must be navigated in a manner consistent with principle and purpose. In a sense, we must ask which controlling purposes will guide our selection of purposes and priorities. As this is a formative question in itself, it would not be inappropriate to think of structuring answers to these questions in a meta-formative theory; that is, an account of how one determines how one ought to select how to develop oneself. In what follows, I offer a meta-formative approach that may serve to guide that selection of principles and purposes.

In order to fruitfully articulate the meta-formative foundation that might serve as a productive framework for educational research, I again invoke the illustrative structure of Rawls’ approach to distributive justice: justice as fairness.

Note that Rawls’ distributive theory is certainly liberal, as it prioritizes equality and freedom in its recommendations. But, in order to avoid paradox or internal tension in his work, Rawls invokes a very particular and, at the time, novel form of that concept: political liberalism (Rawls, 1993). Rawls draws upon and extends the philosophical tradition of liberalism in the service of better articulating a vision of justice that might be endorsed by all members of a society. In the service of this effort, Rawls
observes a careful distinction between comprehensive and political liberalism. Rawls argues that while comprehensive liberalism forwards a specific set of values necessary for human flourishing, his political liberalism seeks only to advance a purportedly neutral set of values that might guide deliberation about the structures and circumstances under which reasonable persons live those comprehensive doctrines (i.e., religious worldviews, ethical frameworks, cultural practices, etc...). Rawls' detailed discussion of this distinction rests in the notion that the plurality of perspectives in contemporary societies renders improbable the occurrence of a fully shared comprehensive doctrine across a society (Rawls, 1993). Via this observation, ‘political liberalism’ asserts a standard that endorses individual liberty without requiring controversial metaphysics – statements about what is objectively valuable or worth pursuing (Rawls, 1985). Indeed, persons may even come to endorse shared principles of ‘political liberalism’ through arguments attuned to their own private comprehensive doctrines, yet bracket those arguments in favor of publicly shared reasons when deliberating with their fellows (Rawls, 1993).

In some ways, political liberalism houses the distributive theory of justice as fairness; it organizes and structures it. Rather than a metaphysical, moral theory of the good it is a political statement of the right. Perhaps theories of formative justice might similarly benefit from an organizing structure?

Some approaches have quite literally invoked the values and priorities of political liberalism to house what might be considered formative considerations (Weaver-Hightower & Apple, 2008)(Jonathan, 1997)(Torres, 2002)(Snik & De Jong, 1995)(Lawson, 1985)(Bull, 2012)(Jónsson, 2012)(Ferkany & Whyte, 2013)(Brighouse & Swift, 2003). These views ask how educational questions of formation might be framed in reference to that political version of liberalism. While they may evidence the relevance of formative justice in political processes and theorizing, these sorts of approaches ultimately rely on political conceptions of rights and the preparation of citizens. They cannot serve as ready candidates for frameworks in which to house formative justice as a distinctly educational project. Instead, we must depart from the political content of this structure towards more fully educational questions. Rather than rehearse the structures of political liberalism, formative justice is an opportunity to pursue productive work in the domain of educational liberalism.

As political liberalism insists upon its neutrality to metaphysical claims in the service of workable and productive political standards of liberty and equality, perhaps formative justice might similarly ensconce itself in educational liberalism as a safeguard against internal tensions of problematic metaphysics, erecting an educational standard of liberty and equality. Political liberalism can be understood to assert its neutrality to metaphysical and moral claims on the basis of reasonable pluralism between peoples and an uncertainty about the good. Instead of these concerns, educational liberalism locates its agnosticism in an uncertainty relative to what we might become. Under educational liberalism we would not prioritize worries about whether persons in a diverse society are prohibited from endorsing their conception of the good. Instead we wonder about whether we are forming characteristics, skills, dispositions and the like, which prevent us from endorsing our as-yet-unknown principles and priorities (inclusive of conceptions of the good). In this, the liberty and equality that characterize educational liberalism are found in the freedom to realize, without prejudice, a fuller cache of potentially valued possibilities. This refusal to advocate for a particular outcome, instead structuring how
we select outcomes, keeps this account from becoming comprehensive. As such it is a theory that asserts a definition of what is educationally *right*, rather a metaphysically weighty statement of what is educationally *good* for the persons or groups.

We must be careful in selecting or identifying educational liberalism. Political ends can readily dominate the work (Waldren, 2013). I submit that our efforts are well served by approaching this type of liberalism through a conceptual stance that foregrounds the educational nature of our enterprise. Ironically, just such an entry point to a theory of educational liberalism can be found in Rawls’ explicitly political work. As McClintock notes, the hypothetical thought experiment of the veil of ignorance is a literal fact for those engaging the unavoidable questions of formation. Rawls does not claim that the veil actually exists; he uses it as a tool of abstract theorizing for imagining how participants might structure a society while ignorant of their personal gain. But, in a very undeniable sense, the veil does exist.

To some degree we are each ignorant of what we might become. McClintock (2015) writes, “Neither the infant, nor anyone around him, knows what his capacities, fully developed, will be. To reveal them, the infant must develop his capabilities, and people around him should help as fully as possible: here is the rationale [...] for fully developing the potentialities of each and every person” (McClintock, 2015, p. 9). As persons (or groups) unaware of what we might become or desire to be in the future, we ought to tread lightly in selecting opportunities that do not unduly restrict similar choices of the potentialities upon which we might draw in future (Feinberg, 1980). We might also make these choices in references to the potentialities that emerge for others; safeguarding their potential for a broader choice of study and the resultant life/developmental choices thereby made possible. (McClintock, 2015, p. 8)

Of course, some potential outcomes will be lost no matter what we choose. Attempting to keep all of our potentialities evenly accessible may result in the loss of particular potentialities that require active efforts in order to be kept viable. We can think here of the child for whom the potential for success in a specific athletic enterprise, say gymnastics, requires intense training from an early age such that energy and time is no longer available for another effort, say, taking up boxing as a serious endeavor. To select one is to choose not to seriously pursue the other, but to choose neither is to lose a considerable degree of potential for either. Still, though this insight may guide further actions, choices must be made. And they must be made well.

In recognition of this, we can structure many of our formative choices according to what I would like to call the Principle of the Preservation of Potentialities. This principle states that:

*The selection of principles and pursuits ought to be engaged such that the greatest number of potentially valued possibilities remains intact. This goal can be compromised in the event of compelling evidence that a selection, which collapses other possibilities, will increase fulfillment relative to foreseen alternatives.*

This principle, originating from the reality of the literal veil of ignorance, is the cornerstone of an approach to educational liberalism, as one way in which to organize productive educational efforts towards formative justice. In this, we have selected a particular account of formative justice that, in light of necessary limitations, foregrounds
formative freedom amongst otherwise equally accessible alternatives: justice as preservation.

4. Conclusion

In avoiding metaphysical justification for formative efforts, educational liberalism advances a particular account of formative justice, justice as preservation, as a framework upon which to rest normative claims. This educationally liberal approach is distinctly educational, rather than based in moral, political, or other disciplines. In sum, the presentation of this theory returns to the question at the outset of this paper. Yes; educational research can indeed pose its own questions of justice. This theory is but one example of productive normative work upon the questions of formation.

Though educational research towards these efforts might be accomplished via the framework offered, this essay has done more than promote a particular scheme of educational practices or advocate a specific set of educational policies. Instead, I have crafted a context for better understanding the place of and potential for the formatively valuable impulses towards liberty in education without also attaching controversial metaphysical claims of human flourishing to that definition. This project suggests a conceptual frame under which pedagogical tools or theories might be debated, discussed, and selected without injury to reasonable educational perspectives.

The principle of the Preservation of Potentialities returns to the previous questions of formation, answering them in turn. To wit, groups can justify their particular formative goals relative to their support under the preservation of potentialities. The method of selection of these goals matters for this theory only so far as the process of selection collapses or creates potentialities of persons or groups. One can measure and weigh the internal tensions of self against the possibilities for fulfillment in light of formative choices. This sees the individual attending to their self as an ongoing project of creation and maintenance. One can err, and have that error be seen clearly by external observers, if one selects unduly destructive formative efforts without compelling cause.

Educational researchers can engage these insights towards posing and addressing urgent questions of formation. The example of this theory evidences that, rather than relying upon other disciplines to articulate questions of education, education can function as an independent arena of study. In fact, scholars might begin turning around this essay’s earliest premise. We might imagine work that poses formative questions of political units, of ethical interactions, of social phenomena, and very much more. To wit, one can ask: how might distinctly educational research lend new insights to countless other disciplines, posing questions of formation with normative force?

Notes
1. One might easily imagine generative explorations of formative justice alongside nuanced understandings of human capabilities.

2. Though none of these sources list identifies the formative concerns of their project, in my view a formative reading is tenable.

3. The relationship between educational liberalism and liberal education might be described as analogous to the relationship between political liberalism and liberal politics.
Bibliography


