

This is the pre-copyedited, post-peer review version of an article published in the edited book *Conceptual Engineering in Education* by Brill Mentis. The final published version of the article can be accessed at: https://doi.org/10.30965/9783969753033_010

Citation: A. C. Nikolaidis, “Engineering Educational Justice: From Fair Educational Opportunity to Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement.” In *Conceptual Engineering in Education: Philosophical Analysis for Educational Problems*, edited by Jane Gatley and Christian Norefalk, 158–177. Leiden: Brill Mentis, 2024.

Engineering Educational Justice: From Fair Educational Opportunity to Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement

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Abstract: In recent years, analytic philosophers of education have been advocating the use of ameliorative conceptual analysis to analyze concepts related to education. This paper advances this end by providing an ameliorative account of “educational justice.” Despite the prima facie ameliorative status of the dominant “fair educational opportunity” conception of educational justice, the author argues that the dominant conception fails to produce socially just outcomes by reifying the unjust social structure and distracting from the pursuit of policy reforms that could better tackle social injustices that are noneducational in kind. Instead of fair educational opportunity, the author contends, we ought to orient our education policy endeavors toward the pursuit of epistemic empowerment and developmental enablement.

1. Introduction

Recently, Jane Gatley (2022) defended the value of conceptual analysis in educational philosophy by advocating a turn toward ameliorative analyses of the sort that Sally Haslanger (2000, 2005, 2012) introduced more than two decades ago with regard to gender and race. This form of conceptual engineering aligns educational concepts with valued social ends and has the potential to generate social progress, Gatley argues, insofar as concepts inform the way we view education and by extension our educational endeavors. Accordingly, we ought to revisit important educational concepts to determine whether the way we conceptualize them produces the best possible outcomes: that is to say, whether the form of education these concepts are

suggestive of benefits the individuals who undergo it and society at large and whether they provide practicable guidance on implementing the suggested form of education.

In this paper, I apply Gatley's ameliorative approach to conceptual analysis to a familiar concept that has dominated conversations in education for decades, namely, *educational justice*. Specifically, I push back against the dominant conception of educational justice as *Fair Educational Opportunity* (FEO) and argue for an alternative conception of educational justice as *Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement* (EEDE). This endeavor might strike readers as odd. If the spirit of ameliorative analysis is to align our concepts with valued social ends, then FEO certainly seems to be the best way for doing so since it leverages the power of education as a social equalizer. Why, then, do we need a different conception of educational justice and why does ameliorative analysis point to EEDE rather than FEO?

I contend that, while both EEDE and FEO are social justice oriented and, in that sense, *prima facie* ameliorative, only the former can lead to substantive social progress. This is because, unlike FEO, EEDE foregrounds education as a fundamental human endeavor and its scope and purpose are not delimited by the basic social structure which is largely responsible for the injustice that we observe in contemporary society. EEDE is able to disrupt the ideological mechanisms that maintain social injustice and, with them, the social structure that perpetuates social inequality even when efforts are made to compensate socially disadvantaged groups for their undeserved disadvantages. The upshot is that we ought to replace FEO as the normative ideal that guides our education policy reform efforts with EEDE.¹

¹ The focus on FEO and EEDE does not imply that these two are the only viable conceptions of educational justice. However, I focus on the limitations of FEO because it is arguably the dominant conception of educational justice, and I argue in favor of EEDE because I believe that it is a viable alternative that merits serious consideration. My argument is, therefore, limited in scope in that it is not intended as an exhaustive account of conceptions of educational justice and their normative legitimacy. Instead, it is a limited argument for replacing FEO with EEDE in our pursuit of educational justice through education policy reform, among other things.

The argument of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines three approaches to educational justice theorizing and aligns these with the two conceptions of educational justice discussed in the paper, FEO and EEDE. Section 3 discusses three different approaches to analyzing concepts and applies these to educational justice. Moreover, it aligns each analytic approach with one or more approaches to educational justice theorizing presented in section 2 and with one or both conceptions of educational justice. Section 4 builds on the distinctions presented in sections 2 and 3 to advance an ameliorative account of educational justice. It discusses why educational justice should be conceptualized in essentialist terms, presents limitations of FEO as a conception of educational justice, and advocates for EEDE as the preferred conception of educational justice. Section 5 concludes by outlining the benefits of aligning our pursuit of educational justice with EEDE.

2. Approaches to Theorizing Educational Justice

Educational justice has long dominated conversations in education policy research and education policymaking. The pursuit of and advocacy for particular education policies—whether these be associated with leftist (e.g., public schooling, cultural responsiveness, restorative practices) or rightist (e.g., market-based school choice, strict standards, orderly classrooms) political ideologies—is usually couched within the discourse of educational justice and presented in ways that suggest that the policies in question are necessary for serving the interests of all students, and especially those with the greatest educational needs. The demands of justice for education, it is thought, center on the need for education to ensure that all students are prepared to enter society and to pursue a way of life that will allow them to flourish, both individually as human beings capable of self-determination and collectively as citizens capable of social cooperation.

This approach to educational justice demonstrates a clear alignment of educational justice and social justice. Educational justice is attained only insofar as education supports the pursuit of social justice—though, of course, one’s conception of educational justice will vary depending on one’s conception of social justice. This approach to theorizing educational justice can be called *justice through education*.

The justice-through-education approach is distinct from a second well-known approach to theorizing educational justice which we can call *justice in education*. The justice-in-education approach requires that education be a social institution intrinsically characterized by fairness, and not simply one that leads to fair socioeconomic outcomes outside education. Accordingly, unfair educational procedures or practices, such as the arbitrary denial to any recipient of education of the same high-quality instruction that others receive, are prohibited. Of course, on closer look one observes that the two approaches often align. For justice through education to obtain, justice in education must also obtain. Should one receive a lower quality education than another (a violation of the demands of justice-in-education), it is more difficult for one to succeed socioeconomically than another insofar as their success depends on the quality of education that they receive (a violation of the demands of justice-through-education). However, the two approaches are distinct insofar as a potentially unfair allocation of educational resources within the system of education, such as the disproportionate funneling of resources to gifted education (a violation of the demands of justice-in-education), may increase the overall life prospects of all students and perhaps the worst-off students most of all (a fulfillment of the demands of justice-through-education). This suggests that although justice-through-education views education

purely instrumentally, justice-in-education views it as being intrinsically valuable and thus as being owed to everyone regardless of social outcomes.²

Finally, a third, also distinct but less theorized, approach to theorizing educational justice is what can be called *justice to education*. The justice-to-education approach requires that education as an institution enables the pursuit of education *qua* education, where education is understood as a natural human endeavor that ought to be pursued unimpeded no matter the non-educational consequences of such a pursuit. Here we see a rejection of the instrumentalism of justice-through-education and an embrace of justice-in-education's focus on the intrinsic value of education. Again, on closer look one observes that the three approaches often align. For justice in and through education to obtain, justice to education must also obtain to some extent. Should one be denied an appropriate education altogether (a violation of the demands of justice-to-education), educational procedures are likely unfair (a violation of the demands of justice-in-education) and unfair socioeconomic outcomes likely ensue (a violation of the demands of justice-through-education). Yet it is possible, given the distinctness of these conceptions, to maintain justice in and/or through education while failing to maintain justice to education. Since justice in and through education are comparative terms—which explains the general focus of such approaches to educational justice on equality—an education of equally poor quality for all students might remain fair as to its procedures, practices, and socioeconomic outcomes (a fulfillment of the demands of the justice-in-education and justice-through-education approaches)

² The distinction between *justice through education* and *justice in education* mirrors Hugh Lazenby's (2016) distinction between equality of opportunity *through* and *for* education. Moreover, it mirrors Larry Temkin's (2016) distinction between, on the one hand, equal opportunity *through* education, and, on the other, equal opportunity *for* and *in* education (Temkin's *for* and *in* conceptions jointly encompass what I consider relevant to the *justice-in-education* approach).

yet unjustly limit students' ability to pursue education unfettered (a violation of the demands of the justice-to-education approach).

Typically, scholarship on educational justice prioritizes the justice-through-education approach, with the justice-in-education approach considered insofar as it promotes the goals of justice-through-education. Most of this scholarship, moreover, relies on the Fair Educational Opportunity (FEO) conception of educational justice, because FEO's comparative nature best aligns with the goals of the justice through and in education approaches (see, for example, Anderson 2007, Brighthouse and Swift 2008, 2009, Harel Ben-Shahar 2016, Jacobs 2010, Lazenby 2016, Temkin 2016, Satz 2007, Schouten 2012, 2023, Warnick 2015). This has led to a strong emphasis on the instrumental value of education for social justice, and to a relative neglect of the potential that the intrinsic value of education has for social justice.³ Contrary to this position, I contend that, given education's subversive potential, it is the third of the three approaches to educational justice—the justice-to-education approach—that holds the greatest potential for accomplishing our social justice aims. In this sense, justice-to-education is also a promising approach for accomplishing justice *through* education. However, the two approaches ought not be equated because a focus on justice-through-education separately from justice-to-education lends itself to educational reforms that fail to disrupt the most salient causes of social injustice. It is precisely the prioritization of education as an intrinsically valuable endeavor irrespective of comparative assessments that lends itself to more efficaciously accomplishing social justice aims. For this reason, the justice-to-education approach best aligns with the Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement (EEDE) conception of educational justice, which, instead of being comparative, highlights the importance of creating conditions that allow

³ There are, of course, scholars who address how the intrinsic value of education can be leveraged to produce structural change (e.g., Allen 2016, Blum and Burkholder 2021).

education to proceed unimpeded. In what follows I prioritize the justice-to-education approach and the EEDE conception of educational justice as the most promising alternatives that ameliorative analysis of educational justice has to offer.

Table 1: Approaches to Theorizing Educational Justice

Approach	Focus	Purpose	Conception
Justice <i>through</i> Education	Education's instrumental value as social equalizer	Educational justice obtains when education promotes social justice	FEO
Justice <i>in</i> Education	Education's intrinsic value as good that all should have equal or equitable access to	Educational justice obtains when education as a social institution is intrinsically fair	FEO
Justice <i>to</i> Education	Education's intrinsic value as fundamental human endeavor that ought to be pursued unimpeded	Educational justice obtains when education as a social institution enables the pursuit of education as a human endeavor	EEDE

3. Approaches to Analyzing Educational Justice

Based on the typology presented above, one can examine different approaches to analyzing the concept of educational justice and the relevant educational aims one espouses. Haslanger (2000, 2005, 2012) has outlined three different types of analysis that a concept might undergo, which she calls conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative. She defines them as follows:

Conceptual analyses elucidate “our” (manifest) concept of *F*-ness by exploring what “we” take *F*-ness to be.

Descriptive analyses elucidate the empirical kinds (the operative concept) into which “our” paradigm cases of *F*-ness fall.

Ameliorative analyses elucidate “our” legitimate purposes and what concept of *F*-ness (if any) would serve them best (the target concept). Normative input is needed. (2005, pp. 19–20)

According to Haslanger (2005), each of the above analyses serves a different purpose. Conceptual analysis is concerned with our shared understanding of a concept *X*. The question it seeks to answer is ‘What do *we* mean by concept *X*?’ and the answer it provides relies on “*a priori* methods such as introspection . . . Taking into account intuitions about cases and principles, one hopes eventually to reach a reflective equilibrium” (p. 12, emphasis in original). Conceptual analysis elucidates the manifest concept of *X*, or the “explicit, public, and ‘intuitive’” (p. 14) concept of *X*. The manifest concept depicts how we think about concept *X* and how we assume that concept *X* is used. Descriptive analysis, on the other hand, is concerned with the accuracy of concept *X* instead of nuances in the concept’s popular use. The question that descriptive analysis seeks to answer is ‘What real-world objects or phenomena does concept *X* track?’ and the answer it provides relies on “on empirical or quasi-empirical methods” (p. 12). Descriptive analysis reveals the operative concept of *X*, or our “implicit, hidden, and yet practiced” (p. 14) concept of *X*. The operative concept depicts how we actually apply the concept in real life.⁴ Finally, ameliorative analysis is concerned with our legitimate purposes and whether concept *X* is suitable for accomplishing these. The question that ameliorative analysis seeks to answer is ‘What is the point of having concept *X*?’ and the answer it provides relies on “enhancing our conceptual resources to serve our (critically examined) purposes” (pp. 12–13), perhaps by “providing a (possibly revisionary) account of the everyday concepts” (2000, p. 33).

⁴ For a detailed account of the manifest vs. operative concept distinction see also Haslanger (1995).

Ameliorative analysis reveals the target concept of X, or the concept of X that we ought to have. The target concept depicts how we ought to think about and use concept X to advance our legitimate purposes.

With regard to educational justice, conceptual analysis points toward all three approaches to educational justice theorizing. The way we tend to think and talk about educational justice, both in the everyday use of the term and in the philosophy of education literature, covers justice through, in, and to education. This makes the manifest concept of educational justice compatible with both the FEO and EEDE conceptions of educational justice. As to descriptive analysis, we must direct our attention to the ways in which educational justice is pursued in the real world. The pursuit of educational justice in the real world takes many forms, but the most notable is education policy reform which, in virtue of the government's regulatory power and access to resources, can produce large-scale change. Education policy reform geared toward educational justice tends to follow the justice-through-education and justice-in-education approaches. The operative concept of educational justice is, therefore, FEO. It is FEO that most education policymaking aims to produce (Maguire 2019), and it is FEO that most policy-guiding discourse on educational justice foregrounds (Schouten 2023).⁵ Finally, with regard to ameliorative analysis, I argue that it should be based on the justice-to-education approach because it is the most promising approach for accomplishing our social justice aims. The target concept, therefore, aligns with EEDE.

⁵ It is noteworthy that, insofar as it tracks how educational justice is pursued in the real world, the operative concept may have to include approaches that are practiced in some independent education settings that differ from the dominant approach embodied in FEO. However, the operative concept I focus on here is FEO because of its dominant nature and the difficulty of adequately capturing the pluralism of educational justice pursuits in the real world.

Yet, as mentioned above, FEO is also *prima facie* ameliorative because justice through and in education intuitively seem to be the approaches most conducive to social progress. The justice-through-education approach aligns the pursuit of educational justice with the pursuit of social justice, while the justice-in-education approach complements it by aligning the pursuit of educational justice with the benefit to each person who undergoes education, and not just with society in general. How, then, might the justice-to-education approach be preferable in ameliorative terms than the justice-through-education and justice-in-education approaches, and, relatedly, how might EEDE be preferable to FEO?

I argue that this is the case for two reasons. First, the justice-through-education and justice-in-education approaches (and FEO as the operative concept), fail to produce the social justice outcomes that they promise to produce. This is because they reify the unjust system that produces inequalities and distract from the real causes of social injustice. Second, the justice-to-education approach is best equipped to foster epistemic agency and disrupt the impact of harmful ideologies in students' intellectual and moral development. Together, these lines of argument, to be developed in the next section, suggest that the target concept of educational justice is EEDE and that the operative concept which is currently FEO should be replaced with EEDE. It also suggests that of the two forms that the manifest concept of educational justice takes, EEDE is the better one because it is also the target concept and because the educational aspects it highlights have priority over aspects that FEO highlights.

Table 2: Approaches to Analyzing Educational Justice

Analytic Approach	Concept	Purpose	Corresponding Educational Justice Theorizing Approach (Conception)
Conceptual Analysis	Manifest Concept	Identifies how we use concept	Justice through/in/to education (FEO & EEDE)
Descriptive Analysis	Operative Concept	Identifies what concept empirically tracks	Justice through/in education (FEO)
Ameliorative Analysis	Target Concept	Identifies what concept best accomplishes our legitimate purposes	Justice to education (EEDE)

4. Conceptually Engineering Educational Justice

Having described what different analytic approaches entail and what each of these suggests about educational justice, I now move on to the main task of the paper: namely, to provide an ameliorative analysis of educational justice and show why EEDE is the target concept of educational justice. To do so, I will elaborate on the points made in the previous section regarding (1) the priority of justice to education over justice in and through education, and therefore of EEDE over FEO as manifest concept of educational justice, (2) the failure of FEO to advance the aims of social justice as operative concept of educational justice, and (3) the alignment of EEDE with the aims of social justice, and therefore its status as the target concept of educational justice. Together these points justify replacing FEO as the operative concept of educational justice with the target concept, EEDE.

4.1. The Manifest Concept: The Priority of Justice in Knowledge Acquisition and Self-Formation

As mentioned above, conceptual analysis of educational justice points toward all three approaches to theorizing educational justice—justice through, in, and to education. This is because the way that we use educational justice in our daily discourse emphasizes the role of education as an engine of social mobility and social equalizer (justice-through-education), the importance of distributing education, and goods thereof, in a fair and equitable manner (justice-in-education), and the importance of doing justice to one's education by pursuing educational opportunities that will allow one to grow and flourish as a human being with unique dispositions, talents, and interests, among other things (justice-to-education). This means that the manifest concept of educational justice is compatible with both the FEO and EEDE conceptions of educational justice.

Nonetheless, the justice-to-education approach and its related conception of educational justice, EEDE, should receive priority because they are more educationally essential and, for this reason, also implied in the justice-through-education and justice-in-education approaches and their related conception of educational justice, FEO. This priority is justified by, what I believe and will assume to be, two essential features of education that both the justice-to-education approach and EEDE foreground: knowledge acquisition and self-formation.⁶ If knowledge is the object of education, then no education can ever take place without some knowledge being acquired by the person undergoing education.⁷ If self-formation is the process and the end

⁶ The claim here is that knowledge acquisition and self-formation are each individually necessary and jointly sufficient for education to take place. Given the scope of this paper, I cannot provide a full argument as to why these features are indeed essential to education—I do this in Nikolaidis (forthcoming). I will simply assume this to be a relatively uncontroversial claim, though I acknowledge that not everyone may be inclined to agree.

⁷ Knowledge here is understood broadly, and includes propositional, practical, tacit, embodied, and moral knowledge, among other epistemic goods.

product of education, then no education can ever take place without the person undergoing education being formed into someone they were previously not. This essentialist picture of education is reflected in accounts of educational justice that instead of focusing on the distributive considerations that FEO makes salient, focus on the epistemic (Kotzee 2013, Kotzee and Martin 2013, Martin 2020) and formative considerations (McClintock 2016, 2019, Thompson 2016) that EEDE makes salient.

Conversely, the justice-through-education approach and its related conception of educational justice, FEO, are tangentially educational considerations, not essentially educational ones. For example, one's ability to find a good job is not essentially based on one's education, but rather on the availability of good jobs. Should the economy be strong enough that good jobs are available for all, then what education one has might impact what job they will find but not that they find a good job—or, relatedly, their chances of upward social mobility. Moreover, should good jobs remain scarce and available only to few people, the fact that selection of those few is often made through consideration of one's education is not relevant to education *qua* education.⁸ In principle, the selection could be made through educationally irrelevant processes such as one's social connections, which is how it is often made. The fact, then, that these decisions usually consider one's level of education is a matter of contingency. What seems to be essential about education is that it involves the acquisition of knowledge and self-formation.

What this suggests is that the instrumental purposes that education serves are too “fundamentally thin or generic” to base a manifest concept of educational justice on, because they do not distinguish education as a distinct means of advancing social justice ends from other

⁸ Of course, knowledge production of the sort that takes place in higher education research institutions can impact job availability, but I consider education here from the perspective of its recipients rather than those who participate within the system as knowledge producers and transmitters.

social institutions that serve the same role (Kotzee and Martin 2013, p. 629). Whether education can serve as a means for upward social mobility, levelling the playing field, or other similar socioeconomic goals, these purposes are only tangentially part of education and contingent on the knowledge that one will acquire through their education and the person they will develop to be. As such, our manifest concept of educational justice not only includes what is essential about education (for example, doing justice to one's education by acquiring knowledge that it is in one's interest to acquire or developing in ways that it is in one's interest to develop), but also necessarily presupposes what is essential about education even when educational justice is thought of instrumentally (for example, as remedying one's undeserved social disadvantage through education). Only what is *essentially* educational is always present when education takes place and, relatedly, can provide a solid foundation for evaluating claims to educational justice, broadly considered. When evaluating an FEO-based claim to educational justice to consider whether one's education enabled them to access socially valuable non-educational goods, one must still rely on essentially educational goods like knowledge and development to determine whether these succeeded or failed to translate into non-educational goods. It follows that EEDE, in virtue of prioritizing knowledge acquisition and self-formation, captures what is essentially educational about educational justice and therefore has priority over FEO.

4.2. The Operative Concept: Educational Justice as Fair Educational Opportunity

Unlike conceptual analysis which aligns with all three approaches to educational justice theorizing, descriptive analysis of educational justice aligns with the justice through and in education approaches. This is reflected from the fact that the emphasis is seldom placed on what knowledge students have access to or whether students can do justice to their self-formation.

There certainly are exceptions to this, as we have recently seen with the increasing focus on culturally responsive teaching which throws light on the kind of knowledge that students have access to. However, even culturally responsive approaches are often reduced to teaching strategies for getting students to learn a canon on which they will be tested and for closing achievement gaps so that all students have a fair chance to compete for scarce socioeconomic rewards. In other words, it is not what students learn or who they become that really matters, but rather what students manage to accomplish with the credentials and skills that education affords them. Insofar as education increases social mobility, decreases social inequality, and improves the living conditions of most, educational justice obtains.

The operative concept that aligns with the justice through and in education approaches and describes how educational justice is pursued in the real world is FEO. Nonetheless, a more accurate descriptor than FEO or fair educational opportunity is the one provided by Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder (2021) who refer to this conception as “equal competitive opportunity.” This is because, according to the operative concept, the purpose that the system of education serves is to level the playing field for all students, such that no students are disadvantaged in the pursuit of opportunities by factors unrelated to the students’ merit like their socioeconomic status. By levelling the playing field, in turn, education guarantees that competition for unequal socioeconomic rewards remains fair (pp. 98–100).

The competitiveness implicit in the operative concept of educational justice compromises the very ability of education to facilitate the pursuit of social justice. First, in preparing students to compete for unequal opportunities to improve their chances of success and social mobility, FEO assumes the overarching system that distributes socioeconomic opportunities unequally (Blum and Burkholder 2021). In doing so, it reifies the very inequalities that it aims to disrupt

and provides them with a patina of legitimacy as the resulting inequalities are no longer attributed to unfair social conditions but to performance differences between talented or hardworking students and untalented or idle students (Sandel 2020). Second, in placing the focus of social inequality on inequalities within and between schools, the blame for and burden of reducing social inequality is placed on education as a social institution, implicitly leaving other social institutions off the hook. This enables the use of education as a means of distraction from the real causes of social inequality and, relatedly, from more meaningful policy reform in the socioeconomic sphere. If the real cause of social inequality is inequality in schooling, then it is school reform that ought to be prioritized instead of socioeconomic reform.⁹ However, inequality persists even though schools seem to generally have an equalizing effect, and if education is to promote the pursuit of social justice more significantly, we ought to stop the use of education as scapegoat and panacea for social injustice (Downey 2020).

4.3. The Target Concept: Educational Justice as Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement

The fact that FEO, as the operative concept of educational justice, fails to advance social justice aims indicates that its *prima facie* ameliorative status falls apart when subjected to scrutiny. As such, the target concept of educational justice cannot be FEO. What might a target concept require, then, to be truly ameliorative? Relatedly, why is EEDE the appropriate target concept? In this subsection, I will answer these two questions to show that EEDE is the target concept of

⁹ Gina Schouten's (2023) description of the priority of education for disrupting social inequality is telling: "Schools are the institutions in society that seem best equipped to set students on equal footing with respect to all that will come after – to *equalize* life opportunities in the face of *unequal* starting points" (p. 190).

educational justice and that FEO as operative concept should be replaced with the target concept, EEDE.

To answer the above questions, one might naturally focus on education's potential to change the world for the better. It is a commonplace assumption that education can be socially transformative—and, in that sense, ameliorative—even when education's role is considered to be that of eliminating social inequalities by advancing social mobility. Yet, I contend, the true locus of education's transformative potential does not lie in its ability to increase social mobility and lead to more fair distributions of social goods by means of education, but rather in its ability to challenge the unjust status quo by disrupting the mechanisms that sustain it. Leveraging education's potential to not simply help disadvantaged groups beat the odds in a system designed to produce inequality but, more importantly, to disrupt the unjust status quo, demands that we focus on, what I suggested are, essential features of education. The reason for this is twofold. First, by pursuing what is essential about education we can dissociate education from socioeconomic outcomes and, in doing so, limit the ability of political elites to use education as a distraction that allows them to avoid disrupting social injustice through policy levers that are more relevant and effective. Second, by pursuing what is essential about education we can tackle the distinctly educational cause of social injustice which, I suggest, is the propagation of ideologies that contribute to social injustice through education.

In my discussion about the manifest concept of educational justice, I suggested that there are two essential features of education that receive priority over instrumental considerations: knowledge acquisition and self-formation. Yet accounts of educational justice that focus on either of these tend to think of them in isolation: educational justice is theorized as epistemic justice or formative justice, but never both. Since both features seem to be essential, however, I

propose that an essentialist concept of educational justice be hybrid: namely, formative epistemic justice. Though I do not have the space to argue for the need and merits of a hybrid approach here, this approach is conceptually sounder and normatively more capacious in virtue of the fact that it takes seriously both essential aspects of education.¹⁰ As such, it can better account for the kinds of (formal, nonformal, and informal) education that exist as well as for the educational injustices we observe in contemporary society (Nikolaidis 2021a, forthcoming).

As a case in point, consider how reconceptualizing educational justice in terms of formative epistemic justice allows us to recast the way we think about educational justice in meaningful ways that belie many of our assumptions regarding justice in education. One interesting example is the education that white middle-class students receive in many Western countries, which is typically considered to be the paragon of good education that ought to be emulated in schools serving marginalized students. Once we examine this education from an essentially educational perspective, we notice that while its wide implementation may benefit some marginalized students socioeconomically it also unjustly insulates privileged students from important realities. As such, it contributes to persistent forms of white ignorance and, in doing so, compromises the epistemic agency of marginalized students (and groups more generally) and the moral development of privileged students in ways that are conducive to the preservation of social inequality. FEO thus fails to challenge the ideological mechanisms that maintain social injustice more broadly and, thus, despite increasing social mobility for some, contributes to the continued oppression and domination experienced by most people of color. Conversely, when we examine the presumably educationally disadvantageous circumstances in which marginalized students live, we notice that they tend to afford those students an outlook that is more attuned to

¹⁰ For a justification of this claim see Nikolaidis 2021a, 2021b, and forthcoming.

the problems of society and thus renders them more likely to have an accurate understanding of reality and more disposed to fight injustice than their privileged counterparts (Dror 2022, Medina 2013, Mills 2007, 2015).

As becomes apparent from this example, an essentialist concept of educational justice is more conducive to the acquisition of knowledge and development of dispositions that are relevant for social justice in virtue of disrupting the ideological mechanisms that sustain social injustice, than an instrumentalist concept which often endorses an education that prepares students to participate in an unjust society instead of challenge it. In disrupting these ideological mechanisms, an essentialist concept removes all pretense that education can alone make a significant impact in the reduction of socioeconomic inequality and disrupts the ideological mechanisms that maintain this myth and enable political elites to ignore severe inequalities. A focus on considerations of epistemic and formative justice, however, leaves much to be wondered about what this actually means for education. I have already indicated that, on the account I am advocating for, educational justice, as a hybrid concept of formative epistemic justice, requires Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement (EEDE). I will now demonstrate why this is so and how EEDE fulfills Gatley's criteria for evaluating educational concepts.

Each of the components of formative epistemic justice aims to ensure that the two essential educational processes presented in the manifest concept proceed uninhibited. I will analyze each of these in turn.

4.3.1. Knowledge Acquisition and Epistemic Empowerment

Human beings are creatures who constantly observe, inquire about, and learn from their environment. Such learning can occur naturally and informally as much as it can occur concerted in formal and nonformal educational settings. Since knowledge acquisition is a natural human endeavor, it might seem odd to argue that education should enable the acquisition of knowledge by learners. However, many of the conditions that humans experience in their daily lives inhibit the acquisition of knowledge for a variety of reasons. When it comes to academic knowledge, for instance, the denial of access to learning spaces in which certain types of knowledge are almost exclusively transmitted can be considered an impediment to knowledge acquisition for that type of knowledge. When it comes to social knowledge, legal, geographic, economic, and social structures can inhibit the transmission of knowledge—as is the case for knowledge regarding the conditions of oppression that many face—by keeping people separated along lines of social class such that those who are disadvantaged are unlikely to be able to transmit knowledge that their social location makes available to them to those who are advantaged and ought to acquire that knowledge. Finally, when it comes to moral knowledge, certain ideologies that dehumanize groups and individuals and, in doing so, rationalize their social disadvantage render it difficult for knowledge that belies these assumptions to receive uptake as these ideologies are self-rationalizing and “epistemologically disabling” (Stanley 2015).

All these are examples in which knowledge acquisition is interrupted through forms of epistemic oppression, either when one is denied access to important epistemic goods that one has a right to acquire or when one is denied the ability to contribute the epistemic resources that one possesses and that are relevant to one’s social location, due to marginalization. The profound

ignorance that this epistemic oppression leads to is then an essential form of epistemic injustice that is not merely epistemically wrongful and harmful, but, importantly, also contributes to the maintenance of severe social injustices that are unrelated to education. The remedy to such epistemic oppression is epistemic empowerment whereby all epistemic agents, including those who are socially marginalized, are empowered to develop and exercise their epistemic agency in any way that it is possible and relevant for them to do so. Epistemic empowerment is, of course, not limited to formal education, though formal education can epistemically empower students by allowing them to participate in epistemic exchanges, encouraging them to make epistemic contributions, and teaching them how to make their voices heard in a society that tends to ignore them.

4.3.2. Self-Formation and Developmental Enablement

Just as knowledge acquisition is a natural human endeavor, so is self-formation. Whether we allow students to develop uninhibited based on their potentialities or try to suppress them, students will develop in ways that, depending on their dispositions, can be more or less advantageous for them. Just as knowledge acquisition can be impeded by either creating physical or psychological and affective barriers to its transmission, self-formation can be impeded by foreclosing certain developmental possibilities or pushing students toward certain developmental outcomes. Denying students, for instance, the capability to be autonomous, limits their self-formation such that they are no longer capable of making important decisions on their own about which developmental opportunities to pursue. Similarly, pushing specific lifestyles on students, especially ones that foreclose the possibility of pursuing other lifestyles, compels students to pursue certain formative outcomes that need not align with their dispositions. Finally, another

case of constraints imposed on self-formation involves the debt culture that accompanies much of the higher education available to students today. If one must become indebted to pursue an education, then they are forced to pursue economically profitable pathways that need not align with their own vision of the good life nor with what is socially beneficial. This constrains their self-formation by pushing them toward status quo friendly developmental outcomes.

Under such circumstances, students experience developmental coercion that compels them to pursue certain developmental possibilities instead of others that might be more beneficial for them. This coercion is not only harmful for the student who undergoes education but also for society at large, as the profoundly unjust basic structure reproduces itself and most people who are victims of this injustice remain oppressed in various ways. The remedy to developmental coercion is developmental enablement whereby developing subjects from all social locations are enabled to pursue whichever developmental possibilities they value and to be in control of their development. Like epistemic empowerment, developmental enablement must take place within formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings. Given their distinctly educational character, however, formal educational settings ought to be more supportive of developmental enablement than nonformal and informal ones. This means that students should be allowed to cultivate all their capabilities and not just academic ones and the formative options available to them should be plentiful, diverse, and viable to the extent that this is possible. This requires revamping not only curriculum but the very structure of formal education which is heavily biased toward academic achievement and fields that are economically productive.

4.3.3. Epistemic Empowerment and Developmental Enablement as Two Sides of the Same Coin

While epistemic empowerment and developmental enablement were theorized separately, it ought to be noted that in practice they cannot be clearly distinguished. All knowledge acquisition impacts one's self-formation and one's self-formation impacts one's ability for and choices regarding knowledge acquisition.¹¹ It is for this reason that the justice concept I am advocating for is hybrid and for this reason that the target concept of educational justice ought to account for both epistemic empowerment and developmental enablement. As a hybrid concept of educational justice, EEDE fulfills all the criteria of a worthwhile educational concept that is socially beneficial. This is because it benefits the individuals who undergo education by facilitating the development of their epistemic agency and their self-formation according to their dispositions, it benefits society by promoting marginalized epistemic resources and rendering it more difficult to conceal the injustices that so many experience on a daily basis, and it is actionable by being suggestive of specific measures and policies that are epistemically empowering and developmentally enabling. As such, EEDE is the appropriate target concept of educational justice and should replace FEO as the operative concept.

5. Conclusion

This paper has offered an ameliorative analysis of educational justice. Relying on Haslanger's approach to conceptual engineering and Gatley's application of this approach to education, I argued that for educational justice to contribute to social progress it ought to be dissociated from the intuitively true and practically inefficacious approaches to justice theorizing which I called justice-through-education and justice-in-education, and from their related conception of

¹¹ Elsewhere I have argued more extensively that this separation is artificial, though analytically useful (Nikolaidis 2021b, forthcoming).

educational justice as FEO. Instead, I presented an educationally essentialist alternative based on a justice-to-education approach which, I suggested, lends itself to EEDE as the relevant conception of educational justice. Accordingly, EEDE is the target concept of educational justice and should replace FEO as the operative concept. To conclude, I will highlight some of the benefits of EEDE as the target concept of education, and of aligning the target concept with the operative concept.

As regards conceptual advantages, the manifest concept that an essentialist account is premised on is more conceptually sound because it focuses on aspects of education that distinguish it from other social endeavors and social institutions. As regards pragmatic advantages, the target concept that an essentialist account is premised on shares the benefits of instrumentalist accounts without being vulnerable to their limitations. Insofar as education can support the socioeconomic aims of a just society by providing knowledge and skills necessary for getting jobs or for producing knowledge that can contribute to the creation of new jobs, this can be done through the pursuit of EEDE which encourages the free and equitable flow of knowledge and the free development of people in alignment with their unique potentialities and interests. On the other hand, insofar as social injustice is the result of noneducational factors such as a capitalist economy or a functionally oligarchic political system, education cannot improve the life prospects of all or even most and so must not be used as a policy distraction from tackling the real causes of social injustice. The essentialist target concept not only avoids the use of education as a distraction that enables the avoidance of substantive policy reform but in fact also promotes social justice by disrupting the impact of harmful ideologies that perpetuate systems of oppression by enlisting the oppressed within the system, despite the material harms that they experience from the status quo (Cudd 2006).

While both conceptual and pragmatic advantages provide good reasons for reconceptualizing educational justice in essentialist educational terms, it is the latter, pragmatic, advantages that are most compelling given their potential to promote social justice. As such, reconceptualizing educational justice to align it with EEDE has the potential to leverage the strengths of education more than FEO in disrupting social injustice. Demonstrating that the target concept of educational justice is EEDE, nonetheless, will not suffice, as the more important task required for educational justice to obtain is to meet the demands of EEDE through policy reform. For this to happen, EEDE must replace FEO as the operative concept of educational justice. Yet this endeavor will certainly be challenging given its potentially disruptive effects for the status quo, and the political backlash that this will likely provoke. A commitment to EEDE as target concept of educational justice is, therefore, only a starting point that compels us to figure out ways to align our real-world pursuits of educational justice with the demands of EEDE.

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