

How to Unpack an Ideological Suitcase

“Educational equity” has a lot of baggage, but three rules could help us match outfits

I SPENT MUCH OF THE PAST TWO YEARS co-leading the Building Bridges Initiative, which sought to bring education reformers from left, right, and center together (again). One useful moment in our deliberations came when a participant introduced the notion of a “suitcase word.”

Like a suitcase, such words may look the same to everyone, but we each have different ideas of what may lie inside. To avoid misunderstandings or unnecessary conflict, it’s helpful to “unpack” these words and be crystal clear about the concepts we’re discussing. Suitcase words are everywhere in our political conversations and in K–12 education, but the granddaddy of them all is surely “educational equity.”

“Educational equity” lands very differently with my friends on the left versus the right. Their suitcases hold strikingly different contents. On the left, the phrase conjures up praiseworthy efforts to help low-income kids and kids of color succeed—to make up for past and present injustices by ensuring that students from marginalized groups have access to schools, teachers, and instruction that are just as good, if not better, than those enjoyed by their more advantaged peers. Who could be against that?

But in conservative circles, there’s much alarm over what we see as the move away from “equality of opportunity” as the goal in American society and its replacement by “equality of outcomes.” This alarm stems from claims like, “The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.” Conservatives view this as a vast oversimplification and at odds with notions of personal responsibility and agency, not to mention meritocracy.

So when liberals see the educational equity suitcase, they picture good things for poor kids and kids of color. When conservatives see that same suitcase, they picture discrimination and redistribution with a soupçon of accusation and implied guilt.

If we could unpack the suitcase, however, we might find a measure of agreement. For example, few people on the left or right would defend our (past) funding system that regularly sent more money to schools serving rich kids than poor kids. Nor would many disagree that it’s more expensive to effectively educate poor students than rich ones, and thus progressive funding policies are appropriate. We can find common ground around school funding reforms that provide adequate and equitable funding to high-poverty schools, as

many red, blue, and purple states have embraced.

Something surely worth trying is to identify specific education policies and practices that embrace a version of “equity” that can garner broad support across the ideological spectrum and benefit the greatest number of students. Let me suggest three rules for doing so.

1. When aiming for equity, we should level up instead of leveling down.

As Noah Smith writes about San Francisco’s attempt to ban high-achieving students from taking algebra until the ninth grade, “When you think about the idea of creating equity by restricting access to advanced math classes, it’s pretty much impossible to avoid the conclusion that the idea is to make all kids equal by making them equally unable to learn.” This is obviously terrible for the high-achieving students who don’t get to live up to their full potential, as well as for low-achievers subjected to the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” We should all reject this version of “equity” out of hand.

2. Focus on closing gaps between affluent students and their disadvantaged peers, not between high-achieving students and their lower-achieving peers.

While most economically disadvantaged students are relatively low-performing academically, thankfully not all are. And if we create policies that encourage schools to prioritize the needs of low-achievers over high-achievers, we create a double-disadvantage for high-achieving, low-income (HALO) students. There’s no moral justification for doing so, nor is there a good argument from a societal level, given that these HALO kids are the ones with the best opportunity to use great schools to pole-vault into the middle class and our leading professions.

3. Focus equity initiatives primarily on class, not race.

Let me be clear: Anti-discrimination efforts must continue to be race-conscious, in line with longstanding civil rights laws. But when we switch our focus from ensuring fair treatment to giving disadvantaged students a boost, we should be cautious about defining disadvantage on racial grounds. Given that most racial disparities in education are correlated with (if not caused by) socio-economic disparities, we can largely work towards racial equity via class-conscious but race-neutral approaches.

If these are the contents of our equity suitcase, I’m convinced we can all find something nice to wear to the party.

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