Theory and Research in Education
http://tre.sagepub.com

Leveling the Playing Field

Harry Brighouse

Theory and Research in Education 2006; 4; 175
DOI: 10.1177/1477878506064543

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://tre.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/2/175

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *Theory and Research in Education* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://tre.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://tre.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

T·R·E

Leveling the Playing Field

HARRY BRIGHOUSE
University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA

ABSTRACT

This article comments on Fullinwider and Lichtenberg's *Leveling the Playing Field*. It reviews their central claims and comments on both their arguments and their reform proposals, and suggests alternative, bolder, egalitarian proposals which involve a higher degree of effective privatization than theirs.

KEYWORDS *equal access, graduate tax, higher education, top-up fees*

Leveling the Playing Field is a terrific book, and a wonderful model of how to do applied normative philosophy. It pursues hard and interesting questions of value in the context of detailed and careful empirical analysis of the situation in higher education. Having established a set of sensible and widely shared normative goals, the authors investigate the empirical evidence that is relevant to those goals; the philosophy guides, but does not get in the way of, the empirical exploration. But it is also obvious that they are steeped in the empirical evidence and institutional detail of the area they are investigating; they haven't looked for the evidence that suits them, or simply gone to respected sources for summaries. In the areas where I know the empirical literature in detail they consistently introduced me to new and more up-to-date findings than I had to hand. I hope that everyone who works in philosophy of education and applied normative philosophy generally will read the book and learn from it, even if they have no great interest in higher education policy. I also hope that policymakers and college officials will read it and implement their recommendations.

The authors take it as read that 'educational opportunities should be enhanced for those who have traditionally been shortchanged' (Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, 2004: 11), and that 'individuals should be neither helped nor

Theory and Research in Education
Copyright © 2006, SAGE PUBLICATIONS, www.sagepublications.com
VOL 4(2) 175–184 ISSN 1477-8785 DOI: 10.1177/1477878506064543

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

hindered in their efforts at educational advancement by factors irrelevant to the legitimate goals of the educational institutions' (p. 13). They carefully elaborate the ways in which the already-advantaged gain additional advantages as they pass through the educational system, and then look at the consequences of this for who goes to college and who goes to which college.

The chapter on the SATs is not better than the rest of the book, but is worth mentioning because it typifies what is so good about the book. The authors look carefully at the criticisms of the SAT in the light of detailed understanding of the construction of the tests and the methods of evaluating them, and, importantly, in the light of the alternatives that have been proposed. They find that the SAT is less invidious than its critics often make it out to be and that the realistic alternatives share, to some extent or another, its drawbacks.

Public action is needed to rectify the unfairnesses they identify, and Fullinwider and Lichtenberg, in the light of the principles they advance, defend affirmative action as legitimate but insufficient; they find that standardized tests have a legitimate role in admissions decisions; but the central reforms should focus on closing the achievement gap between low-income and higher-income students. They argue that highly selective institutions should foreswear legacy admissions and preferences for athletes (which they show to have a huge impact on admissions prospects).

The book gets so much just right that it is hard to criticize it. So instead of offering direct criticism I want to offer an analysis of some of their undefended assumptions, and then make some comments about their proposed policy agenda.

Leveling the Playing Field takes widening access to higher education as a central goal; getting a better match than we currently do between merit broadly understood as it must be (as Rawls might have said) and admissions, and assuming that a very large proportion of any cohort should attend college. Why is this good so urgent from the perspective of public policy; why, in other words, does it matter so much that we try to insulate opportunities to participate in higher eduation (at all levels) from the influence of social origins? After all, we accept, however reluctantly, that access to other goods will be so influenced (for example, access to networks, access to gourmet food, access to foreign vacations, etc).

One reason we might give has to do with economic efficiency; a great deal of productive capacity is wasted by the failure to develop it. This is a public-good argument: as a society we are better off (economically) if we develop more the productive capacity of our citizens, and higher education (HE) is an important means to do that. I am skeptical of this argument. The United States has a great deal of productive capacity, and it is overused: most people spend

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

more time working than they should, and less time with their families and friends than they should. We have exceeded the point at which productive growth is a central public policy imperative, and the policy focus on growth and consumption actually results in people living less rewarding lives than they could. Excessive growth is, in fact, a public bad, not a public good. On top of this fact, most workers have jobs that demand less education than they actually have: much higher education is wasted in economic terms. Finally, the productive capacity argument may not support trying to insulate the prospects for HE against the influence of social-class background because the costs of doing so may well exceed the benefits of the additional productive capacity gained.

I think the more urgent reason for widening access and insulating it from social-class background has to do with the fact that higher education is not really a public good, but a private good subsidised by the public; most of the return from it goes to the person who gets the education. According to the Census Bureau, over an adult's working life, high school graduates earn an average of $1.2 million; associate's degree holders earn about $1.6 million; and bachelor's degree holders earn about $2.1 million (Day and Newburger, 2002).[1] It also, not coincidentally, influences access to interesting occupations: some are now structured so as to require a four-year degree (or a further degree for which a four-year degree is a prerequisite). Up to a certain limit higher incomes influence the level of happiness a person can expect; and higher status and more interesting occupations yield better health states and greater longevity.

Now, we should be a little bit cautious in elaborating the benefits of a higher education. Some of the apparent return on higher education is in fact a return for the kinds of people who get a higher education; some of them would have done as well, or almost as well, without it, because they have, independently of the higher education they receive, saleable attributes. And there is some evidence that the return on higher education is falling, at least in some countries, as uptake increases. But many high-income and high-status occupations simply require higher education, and it is clear that what we are doing in universities is providing people with access to interesting jobs and the higher salaries, increased autonomy, and additional health and longevity that go with them in our society. It seems a bit rich to use public money to provide those who are already more advantaged by birth with access to even greater advantages.

As with any observation about a positional good such as education, two policy trajectories are available to the egalitarian (or, as Lichtenberg and Fullinwider style themselves, the egalitarian of opportunity). The first is to equalize access to the good in question and thereby, indirectly, to equalize opportunity for the good to which it provides access. The other is to break

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

the link between the good in question and the good for which it is positional. A carefully crafted tax-benefit system could reduce the extent to which college education provided access to lifetime improvements in one's earning potential, by, for example, making net wage rates more equal. The Graduate Tax that some have proposed in the UK (and which has been partially implemented in Australia) weakens the link by slightly reducing the effective public subsidy for higher education, and shifting the cost of that subsidy to graduates themselves, hence lowering the effective return on higher education. Fullinwider and Lichtenberg opt for the first strategy. I assume that this is largely because the second seems less than promising in our political environment, whereas almost everyone pays some lip service to the desirability of widening access. Another reason, though, for preferring the first strategy *in this particular case* is that, as well as being instrumentally valuable for access to interesting and well-paid jobs, some higher education is itself intrinsically valuable (a great deal of what is taught in science, humanities and social science departments, for example). It is better to widen access and simultaneously introduce more people to the good of higher education that they will enjoy than to level down, as it were.

What prospects do Fullinwider and Lichtenberg's reforms have for widening access in the way that they intend? In fact their reform agenda is modest: maintain affirmative action; implore selective colleges to foreswear legacy admissions and reduce athletic preferences; and increase tuition subsidies and the availability of loans and grants. Most importantly, they rightly demand measures to reduce the achievement gap between lower-income and higher-income school students.

Although I agree with most of the reforms proposed, I found them a bit disappointing. It is true that closing the achievement gap is, in fact, an incredibly radical goal; the achievement of this would, in my view, require a complete restructuring of the whole economy and society in a firmly egalitarian direction. But Fullinwider and Lichtenberg do not emphasize this fact, and I can understand why: they seek to influence, and not just berate, policymakers. I see a good case for modesty because, in a world in which the wealthy seem to have taken control of everything, there is not much we can achieve. And in some ways my own stance on university admissions is even more modest than theirs: I'm not sure that we should do anything much about them. I want to make some suggestions that focus, instead, on the funding regime and, in particular, on the funding of our state universities.

Fullinwider and Lichtenberg consistently and rightly emphasize that the reason there is so little uptake of higher education by children from low-income and working-class backgrounds is not because colleges discriminate against them, but because there is a catastrophic undersupply of such potential

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

students who are well prepared for college at age 18. There is a large gap in academic achievement, however that is measured or understood, which tracks social class.

How might we increase the supply of adequately prepared students from low-income backgrounds? One suggestion might be that we reverse the current policy of making public spending on K–12 education directly proportional to how well off the students are, and make it inversely proportional: in other words spend about twice as much on lower-income than on higher-income school children, rather than the other way round. I suspect that the gradual and uneven movement toward this end will continue, driven partly by the provisions of No Child Left Behind. But would this make much difference to uptake of higher education? The UK already employs basically this funding arrangement, and it experiences almost exactly the same problem with higher education uptake as the USA, and much the same achievement gap. The countries that have a slightly less stark achievement gap are those with much lower levels of inequality and child poverty than the USA and the UK; but, as we know, reducing inequality and child poverty is not seriously on anyone's agenda in the USA.

What accounts for the achievement gap matters for policy purposes. While the empirical literature on socio-economic class and uptake of educational opportunities is unanimous on the finding that correlates socio-economic class of origin with uptake, the explanations of this finding fall into three broad categories:

1. explanations which appeal to structural barriers to participation (such as the hidden curriculum, discriminatory behaviour by teachers in school, lower quality of schooling for working-class children, etc.).
2. explanations which appeal to the pathologies of class, such as the absence of aspirational differences between middle-class and working-class cultures, or that working-class children (and their parents) are more risk averse with respect to taking on debt.
3. explanations which claim that similarly talented motivated children rationally respond differently to the opportunities presented by the educational system because their background conditions give those opportunities a different character. Marshall et al. (1998) explain as follows:

> Because of the dissimilar opportunities and constraints facing children from working-class and middle-class backgrounds, they (and their parents) are involved in different calculations of the possible costs and benefits of particular educational strategies. . . . From this point of view, aspirations (say) to attend university on the part of working class children are rather more ambitious than would be those same desires when expressed by their middle class peers, and also involve increased risks implied by the attempt to travel a greater social distance. (Marshall et al., 1998: 140–1)

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

> If, for example, a working-class and a middle-class child both place a premium on not slipping down the social scale, the middle-class child *has* to attend university, whereas the working-class child does not.

Of course, there is probably some truth to each of these explanations. But I'm going to focus on the third in order to stay on topic: it is the third which, in so far as it is true, presses us to look at higher education admissions and funding arrangements. The third explanation tells us that what we have to do is change the incentives, and do so in a way that is quite transparent to children who are adopting particular strategies in high school and before. Higher education is risky; the opportunity costs are large, and the costs of dropping out after X years is X years of foregone income and seniority in a job that does not require a college education. (There is some evidence, for example, that if you are only going to complete two years of HE, it is better to do so in a two-year college than in a four-year college.) If you think that HE might not be for you then you have a reason to avoid it altogether and therefore much less incentive to do the requisite learning in high school and earlier. Fullinwider and Lichtenberg document this phenomenon in some detail; neither they nor I are suggesting that actual high-school and middle-school children think about this like economists; but it is not impossible that these considerations influence their behaviour and other people's treatment of them.

If this explanation were the dominant mechanism producing lower achievement and lower HE uptake among less advantaged students, changing admissions practices would not be enough to widen access, and redistributed spending on K–12 would not be enough to address the achievement gap. A key to changing the incentives would be to reform the funding structure of HE, so that children from lower-income families would face lower opportunity costs, and children from higher-income families would face higher opportunity costs, than at present.

I will explore three possible reforms of the funding structure for the state colleges and universities, one of which is actually being pursued (gently and cautiously, and against a great deal of opposition) by the UK Labour government.

I'd like to preface this exploration by saying that the proposals require that we stand back from the assumption, which my students make and most people on the left in the USA make, that higher education is, to quote the slogan, 'a right not a privilege'. In wealthy industrial democracies it is almost universally the case that undergraduate education is a private good publicly subsidised: the economic benefit from this good flows almost entirely to the individual who receives it. The more advantaged you are by social class and nature, the more the state spends on conferring this private benefit on you.

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

For the least advantaged 50 percent (the least advantaged by social class, mainly) the state spends *nothing* on conferring this benefit on them (usually, in the USA, having previously spent a great deal less on educating them up to this point). If we think of higher education as just another good thing, one that is not for everybody, it frees us up to look for alternative uses for the subsidies we currently direct to higher education.

All the alternatives below involve privatizing higher education, in particular the state universities. They do not involve breaking any formal link between these institutions and the government (though in practice they would lead to looser governmental control). But they all remove blanket subsidies for undergraduate education. In other words they all aim to bring nominal tuition into line with the actual cost to the institution of the education provided.

A. In the first proposal, removal of tuition subsidies is combined with direct measures to increase access for children from low-income families. The subsidy which currently underwrites all students attending state universities would be shifted to paying for a sliding-scale, means-tested tuition waiver and a sliding-scale, income-tested maintenance grant. This is, essentially, the strategy currently being adopted by Britain's Labour Party.
B. The second alternative use for the money currently used to subsidise undergraduate education would be the introduction of a universal stakeholder grant, conferred at age 18 (or 22) along the lines proposed by Bruce Ackerman and Anne Alstott in their book *The Stakeholder Society*. They propose a one-time grant of $80,000 for all 18 year olds, which could be used for any purpose (including paying for undergraduate tuition, a down-payment on a house, investing in a business venture). The Labour Party (in the UK) has recently adopted a much scaled-down version of this, in which an account of £500 is established for every baby born after 2002, which can be added to, and will grow tax-free, and can then be accessed for any purpose. A more modest and restrictive version of this suggestion was also mooted by the Labour Party in the 1990s but not, eventually, adopted: the establishment of Individual Educational Accounts, which would be universal grants to be spent only on educational purposes, but which individuals could access at any time over their lives.
C. The final proposal draws an analogy with what it would make sense to do with respect to healthcare. A very large proportion of current healthcare spending is devoted to the last few months of life. People would live longer and healthier lives if we devoted more money to pre-natal and early years care, and to robust public health measures; that would be a more efficient use of the money in terms of health outcomes. The analogy would be shifting the current subsidies for undergraduate tuition toward

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

improved early years and K–8 (or even K–12) education, and what we might call 'robust public education' measures (eliminating child poverty, improving child health states, improving parenting education, etc). The idea is that this would be a more efficient use of government money in terms of educational outcomes, and could more readily be used to improve the education of the least advantaged children than undergraduate subsidies.

I can see all sorts of difficulties with each of these three proposals in practice. Removing the subsidy would raise the costs of public higher education for higher-income students, and thus make it less competitive with private higher educational institutions, which might, ultimately, degrade the public institutions (to the detriment of the low-income students in those institutions). What these proposals share, however, is an attempt directly to attack the unfairness of providing a large government subsidy for an activity the main outcome of which is enhancing someone's income-earning potential, and which goes disproportionately to those who are already among the more advantaged. A and B do this by providing individuals with a direct pecuniary benefit, which they can use at their (limited) discretion. Depending on how they use it, of course, some of it will be eroded by the rising price of certain goods: if most people used it to provide down-payments on house purchases it is predictable that entry-level house prices would rise disproportionately. On the other hand, if that was the favored use, higher education costs would fall slightly.

But A and B also have the feature (which C does not) that they provide assurance to children in school that they will be able to afford at least a considerable part of the costs of college. Elite private and suburban public schools do not only help children with admissions, they also provide or facilitate access to advisors who can help with financial aid planning. Middle-class educated parents are experienced in negotiating institutional and financial complexity. They speak the same language as the college financial aid officers, and their children attend schools with large concentrations of students likely to attend college, with a swathe of counselors and teachers able to give good, well-informed and free advice about the aid policies of a wide variety of institutions. Low-income and working-class parents have fewer such cultural resources; they are less likely to have attended college themselves, the environment is unfamiliar, and their children are more likely to attend schools with counselors and teachers inexperienced in sending students to college. The complexity and opaqueness of current financial aid arrangements mean that even children who would, if they achieved reasonably well in compulsory schooling, get generous support for attending college, have no idea that they would get that support.

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

Regarding college, then, as it is far from a sure bet, disadvantaged children have much less incentive to take up the burden of doing the learning that would provide the key to accessing both college and the financial support they would be entitled to. If foreknowledge of the affordability of college is an important factor in prompting disadvantaged children to take up the education they are provided in high school, the transparency of the proposals made in A and B is a great advantage, even though less would be spent on the quality of the K–12 education they receive than in C. Good information, and transparent policies, are vital for generous means-tested grants to make a difference to the choices that low-income students and their parents make in the crucial six years before college.

The opaqueness of current arrangements is not the only problem with funding arrangements. Another is the reliance on loans rather than grants to cover living expenses for children from low-income families (even when tuition is free or almost free). If we want to change the incentives for low-income children relative to wealthier children, loans are not a good way of doing so, even if the loan regime is well publicized and well understood. The risk that a child from a low-income family (let's call him Bill) takes in taking on a debt to attend college is much greater than that which a child from a higher-income family (Sid) takes. If things don't work out for Bill, he has foregone, say, two years' income and is saddled with a debt repayment. If things don't work out for Sid, his parents will write off the debt. So Bill has a disincentive to take up higher education and an incentive to engage in activities, such as taking on long hours of paid work during his studies, that make it more likely that things will not work out for him.

There are also important political feasibility questions. Labour's attempt to reduce tuition subsidies in the UK has met with massive resistance from the middle and upper-middle classes. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have consistently opposed the tuition increases, and both promise to eliminate tuition fees if they are elected. Tuition subsidies constitute a large welfare program for the middle class, and are known to do so, so they are politically difficult to reduce.

I have argued that a full-blooded approach to widening access to higher education should place more emphasis on funding arrangements than Fullinwider and Lichtenberg do, and that the left might abandon its policy of uncritical support for maintaining subsidies to higher education. These subsidies end up in the hands of the already-advantaged and gain them access to even greater advantages over others. That said, this is an excellent book; everyone interested in access to higher education should read it, and so should anyone who wants to see how to do applied moral philosophy really, really well.

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.

NOTES

1. See also Borland et al. (2000) who estimate the return on higher education in Australia as AU$300,000 (earnings over a working lifetime) and $90,000 (net monetary benefit).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ackerman, B. and Alstott, A. (1999) *The Stakeholder Society*. Yale: Yale University Press.

Borland, J., Dawkins, P., Johnson, D. and Williams, R. (2000) *Returns to Investment in Higher Education: Report to the Vice Chancellor, the University of Melbourne*. Melbourne: Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

Day, J.C. and Newburger, E.C. (2002) The big payoff: Educational attainment and synthetic estimates of work-life earnings (Current Population Reports, Special Studies, pp. 23–210). Commerce Department, Economics and Statistics Administration, Census Bureau, Washington, DC. Available at: http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23–210.pdf.

Fullinwider, R. and Lichtenberg, J. (2004) *Leveling the Playing Field*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Marshall, G., Swift, A. and Roberts, S. (1998) *Against the Odds? Social Class and Social Injustice in Industrial Societies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

HARRY BRIGHOUSE is Professor of Philosophy and Affiliate Professor of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He is a recent recipient of a Carnegie Scholarship, author of *On Education* (Routledge, 2006), and is currently working with Adam Swift on developing a liberal egalitarian theory of the family. [email: mhbrighouse@facstaff.wisc.edu]

Downloaded from http://tre.sagepub.com at SAGE Publications on January 31, 2007
© 2006 SAGE Publications. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.