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Caught in a school choice quandary: What should an equity-minded parent do?

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tre**Michael S. Merry** 

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Abstract

In this article, I examine a case involving an equity-minded parent caught in a quandary about which school to select for her child, knowing that her decision may have consequences for others. To do so, I heuristically construct a fictional portrait and explore the deliberative process a parent might have through a dialogue taking place among ‘friends’, where each friend personifies a different set of ethical considerations. I then briefly consider two competing philosophical assessments but argue that neither position helpfully assists in resolving the quandary. To conclude, I ask the provocative question whether parental motives – but also their school choices – actually matter if the inequitable outcomes seem to remain unchanged.

Keywords

Choice, equity, parents, school

The family has long been recognized as a challenge to the egalitarian concern for equal educational opportunity (Brennan and Noggle, 1997; Brighthouse and Swift, 2009; Fishkin, 1983; Schrag, 1976), where *equality* denotes not a reality but an aspiration (Jencks, 1988). On one hand, most parents – both rich and poor – unconditionally love their children and do what they think is best for them. On the other hand, some expressions of parental support clearly yield educational advantages. These advantages strongly correspond to a large literature documenting the ways in which middle- and upper-class resources and comportment align with the institutional and cultural ethos of the school (e.g. Ball, 2003; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Macleod, 1987; Reay, 2017; Teachman, 1987; Willis, 1977).

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Furthermore, the acquisition of social and (dominant) cultural capital predisposes some students to have greater school attainment than others (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Some, expressed as cultural capital, involve parents passing along their passions and interests, whether or not these explicitly take the form of teaching and learning (e.g. exposing children early to independent reading or knowledge about things deemed to have mainstream cultural importance). Others, expressed as social capital, entail forming specific social ties through peer groups; or selecting high-performing schools and classes; or fostering modes of self-expression (e.g. being socialized to articulate and defend one's ideas and preferences). Furthermore, advantages come from the ability to spend one's free time effectively (e.g. structured play, or participating in team sports and musical performance), or even how to think about one's future (e.g. advice on which courses in school to take, but also how to think ahead and plan for university or a career).

Annette Lareau's work on social class and parenting is relevant here. Lareau (2000, 2003) coined the term, *concerted cultivation* to refer to the conscious and sometimes unconscious ways that well-educated, middle-class, and affluent parents seek to educate their children inside and outside of the home by encouraging certain etiquette, study habits and behavioral norms, membership in recognized social clubs, cultural activities such as museum visits and foreign travel, but also by encouraging a particular communication style, including negotiation and dialogue with adults. In contrast to working-class parents, whom Lareau describes as possessing a parenting style that facilitates what she calls the *accomplishment of natural growth*, where children defer to adult authority because their opinions do not seem to matter, concerted cultivation entails the pursuit of 'teachable moments' throughout the day with one's child. Indeed, many educated parents, in particular, unceasingly engage their children in conversation every hour of the day: while making dinner, at the grocery store, and even while stuck in traffic. Many of the behaviors and interactions described above capture what I subsequently will refer to as *non-material resources*.

Importantly, parents with considerable cultural and social capital may pass along these advantages to their children without any kind of explicit competitive motivation in mind, even if doing so unquestionably provides real advantages. Nor need parents who benefit their children in various ways oppose compensatory efforts or interventions aimed at reducing inequity. To the contrary, parents who self-identify as 'progressive' customarily vote for political parties that favor such measures. Yet, one uncompromising challenge for parents committed to reducing educational inequity is that they can be *simultaneously engaged in doing both*.

The crucial point being underscored is that we recognize how much inequity is in fact rooted in the resource context of the family unit itself, where resources are both material and non-material. However, most of us almost certainly believe that the family (of whatever constellation) is more likely to serve a child's interest than another alternative – such as an orphanage – and consequently, few are likely to take seriously Plato's conviction that the family should be abolished so that justice might prevail (Gheaus, 2018; Munoz-Dardé, 1999). Indeed, not only is the abolition of the family a political non-starter; the absence of the family will strike many as an even greater injustice against children. But if so much inequity is already rooted in the family, then it stands to reason that the educational choices parents make potentially aggravate it.

Scholarship on educational choice is large (e.g. Ball, 2003; Billingham et al., 2020 Burgess et al., 2015; Chubb and Moe, 1990; Whitty et al., 1998; Witte, 2000), as is the scholarship concerning parental choice dynamics in diverse metropolitan contexts (e.g. Andre-Bechley, 2013; Evans, 2021; Goldring and Phillips, 2008; Kimelberg, 2014; Posey-Maddox et al., 2016; Roda and Wells, 2013; Rowe, 2016; Stillman, 2012). Empirical studies often highlight the complexities of school choice, though most do not query whether educational choices made by an equity-minded parent, in particular ones that arguably aggravate inequity, can be morally justified, and if so on what grounds. Moreover, many have a tendency to focus on actors who are implicitly White,¹ middle-to upper class, and entitled. A number of philosophical studies on school choice (e.g. Ben-Porath, 2009; Brighouse, 2000; Clayton and Stevens, 2004; Colburn, 2012; Exley and Suissa, 2009; Swift, 2003; West, 2006; Wilson, 2015; Wolfe, 2008) do explicitly address the relevant ethical concerns, yet often suffer from a weak empirical base, and consequently fail to offer much practical guidance. In any case, none dares to ask the more provocative question, namely, whether the educational choices that parents make actually matter, if in the final analysis inequalities between families are more decisive.

To take up this provocative question, in this article I examine a case involving an equity-minded parent caught in a quandary about which school to select for her child, knowing that (a) she possesses considerable cultural and social capital; (b) the geography is metropolitan and the educational choices are myriad and unequal; and (c) she must attempt to reconcile her expressed concern for equity with selecting an appropriate education for her own child. To distinguish this analysis from American scholarship (which tends to dominate) on one hand, and the inordinate focus on White parents on the other, I consciously construct a fictional portrait of a minority parent in the United Kingdom caught in the quandary of choosing a school for her child amidst a diverse array of options on a metropolitan landscape. Although the portrait I sketch is contrived, the issues in play will be recognizable to many middle-class and educated parents elsewhere, in similarly diverse, metropolitan contexts. Next, I explore the deliberative process an equity-minded parent might have by constructing a dialogue taking place among friends. The 'friends' I invent are but personifications of different considerations in play. I then pivot to consider two philosophical positions that have addressed the thornier moral facets of school choice for equity-minded parents. In the final section of the article, I return to consider the outcome of the deliberation and pause to consider whether parental motives – but also choices – actually matter if the inequitable outcomes are effectively the same.

Part I

A parental portrait

Lakshmi is a 37-year-old single mother and secondary school teacher in a medium-sized metropolis situated in the British Midlands. She is the child of Punjabi Sikh immigrants. She has a graduate degree and above average income. She lives in a low- to middle-income, multicultural neighborhood, where dozens of languages are spoken, and ethnic shops and restaurants are in abundance. The city in question has a child poverty rate that

hovers around 30% of the population; it is one of the most diverse in the United Kingdom, comprising all varieties of political, religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. At the local level, however, there are visible ethnic concentrations. Meanwhile, both ongoing immigration and gentrification continue to change neighborhood and school composition.

As a *citizen*, Lakshmi identifies politically with the Liberal Democrats, who openly oppose all forms of discrimination, and whose policies emphasize progressive taxation, a living wage, and reducing carbon emissions. More locally, she strongly supports affordable housing and community centers for urban youth, where role models are also available to mentor and assist with homework. But her most passionate interests concern the importance of comprehensive (cf. public) education and fair educational opportunities for low-income children. She is vehemently opposed to the expansion of academies (cf. charters), believing that they help to facilitate school segregation. She also opposes expensive, elite schools, which have selective intake procedures and charge hefty fees. She knows that these schools favor the well-to-do, and provide a pipeline of privilege into more selective universities and careers with influence.

As a *teacher*, Lakshmi gives classes in Western history at the local secondary school, specializing in the legacy of the British empire. Although nearly all students have working-class parents, the school is about 30% Black (chiefly of Caribbean extraction), 40% Asian (mostly of Indian extraction, roughly equal parts Muslim and Hindu), and 30% White, nearly all of whom are lower income. Many of her students live on council estates. Once a year she teaches a unit focusing on trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism on the African and Indian subcontinent, and the subsequent mass emigration among former colonial subjects. She often supplements officially sanctioned curricula with the postcolonial literature she read in graduate school, knowing that her doing so is somewhat frowned upon by the school head. But the students generally enjoy the opportunity to hear dissenting voices and debate the issues, and she encourages them to draw connections between historical and contemporary injustices.

As a *parent*, Lakshmi has a 10-year-old son. His father shares custody and they amiably co-parent, though it is Lakshmi who mostly handles the tedium of school-related tasks, meeting with her son's teachers when the need arises. She discusses school work daily with her son and often takes him with her to museums, concerts, and once a year on holiday to another country. She has pushed him to play in the jazz ensemble and take up lacrosse, though neither is available in the local school. Her son is now at an age when a high-stakes entrance exam necessary for selective secondary school is imminent; critically important preparations therefore need to be made, or they will be made for him by those who may not have his best interests at heart. As both an informed mother and employee of the school system, Lakshmi knows all too well what is at stake, and arguably is better positioned than most to make an informed decision concerning what comes next. Already she is making inquiries about a test-coaching service that offers classes on Saturday mornings.

The educational field

In the city in question, there are innumerable educational options. Comprehensives are in the greatest number, but many academies² now sit alongside these, each offering a

slightly different emphasis, including technology, leadership, and math. Furthermore, in addition to long-existing faith schools, such as the Church of England and Roman Catholic, there now is a potpourri of others, including Islamic, Hindu, and Sikh. Most of these are voluntary aided schools, that is, partially financed by the state. On the other side of town, there is a single, expensive private school, which mostly draws from an upper-middle class, largely White demographic just beyond the municipal boundary. Long operating as a magnet for socially privileged families, its reputation rests on its track record of sending many of its graduates to selective Russell Group (cf. Ivy League) universities such as Leeds, Durham, Oxford, and Edinburgh.

As is the case elsewhere, the reputation of each school varies from one to the next. Election cycles routinely bring with them speeches by local MPs about the ‘educational crisis’, tacitly understood to mean the current state of comprehensives that – particularly in majority–minority neighborhoods – have long struggled with teacher shortages and more generally labored under a reputation of mediocrity (even when, on occasion, league tables often paint a more positive picture). Whereas a majority of parents continue to choose a school that either is closest to home or else conforms to one’s cultural-religious background, an increasing number of well-educated parents like Lakshmi devote an inordinate amount of time researching educational alternatives for their own children. Some draw an initial impression from ranking lists provided by a popular monthly published each year. Others rely heavily on the opinions and advice from their social network. And though no one admits it openly, upwardly mobile parents of all backgrounds instinctively take the ethnic-racial and socioeconomic composition of a school as a proxy for school quality.

The search begins

During her many ruminations, Lakshmi tells herself that her principal concern is simply that her son has a ‘good education’. She knows that she and the boy’s father both have advanced degrees, and consequently that it is somewhat irrational to be overly concerned about school choice. After all, she provides ample learning opportunities that many other parents don’t, or perhaps can’t. At the same time, she also worries that her son may not be such a great student; indeed, given his enthusiasm for video games, getting him to apply himself academically has been a challenge thus far. She worries about the friends he keeps, or may meet at his new school, knowing all too well how peer groups influence teen behavior, including academic orientation. (She privately holds the view that both the White ‘chavs’ and Caribbean boys in her own school are bad influences.) Finally, because her son is racialized as Brown, she worries that his teachers – more than half of whom are female and White – may not recognize his abilities and thus hold him to a lower standard. She therefore begins in earnest the task of finding ‘the right school’ for her son, rather than allowing his test score or her postcode to do the work for her.

However, as she undertakes this school-searching task, Lakshmi becomes increasingly ambivalent, knowing that her views on fair educational opportunity are well known at school and among her friends. Moreover, as a teacher in the local comprehensive and active member in the community, she knows that most of her neighbors either cannot or will not exercise a choice similar to hers. For them, the local school is ‘good enough’,

and, when compared with the country of origin, even thought to be comparatively better. She knows this not only because she has interacted with many of her student's parents, but also because her own immigrant parents share this view.

Lakshmi sincerely believes in the importance of fair play. Moreover, she knows that the educational field is competitive, and consequently the choices that she makes occur against an existing empirical reality of considerable inequity. In other words, she knows all too well that the playing field is not level. It is not level, first, because the educational options – as ever – are objectively disparate in terms of quality, and second, because the information available via social networks, but also the skill, monetary resources, and time needed to navigate the educational field while advocating for the needs of one's child – not to mention holding down a job – are not available to everyone. Taken together, for Lakshmi this heightened awareness poses a distressing moral quandary.

Her doubts are relentless. Are her fears justified? Will her decision potentially aggravate the existing problems? Doesn't her attentive parenting at home already compensate for any deficits at school? Will others accuse her of hypocrisy? Do her assumptions lean heavily on a classist and racist logic about school quality? Do her choices matter at all in the grand scheme of things? After all, she already devotes a great deal of time to his education outside of school, and moreover has begun inculcating the ambition to attend university. On the contrary, she wonders, if she were to choose a school outside the local catchment area, what difference can one less kid in the local comprehensive possibly make? Wouldn't her son's absence simply free up resources for other children who arguably need it more?

Taking stock

Lakshmi appears to be faced with a genuine moral quandary, precisely because other important and defensible values and considerations come into view, particularly as these concern both her love and moral obligation toward her son. And because parents have these moral obligations, they are quite rightly *expected* to be partial toward their children, and hence lavish affection, time and resources on them, even when some parents manifestly have more material and non-material resources at their disposal. Indeed, we feel that parents who exercise their prerogatives within reasonable and legitimate bounds are duly considered as *good parents*.³ Yet as we shall see, the moral difficulty is to be found in debates about what is reasonable and legitimate.

In short, Lakshmi's educational quandary is formidable indeed, for similar to many other parents she feels mounting pressure to both 'do what is right' while also 'doing what is best' for her son. And while she is viscerally opposed to unfair advantage (including her own), she cannot help but acknowledge that the world around her has never seemed more competitive than it does right now, and she worries that she might be projecting these anxieties onto her still young child, whose entire future lies ahead of him. Meanwhile, the clock in her head is ticking. Still uncertain about what to do, she invites five of her closest friends over for tea.

As we turn to this interaction, the reader is asked to remember that her 'friends' in this dialogue are but personifications of different perspectives that Lakshmi is invited to consider.

Tea Time

After half an hour of small talk, they get down to business. Lakshmi's anguish is evident to all. She begins by offering the caveat that having so many educational options of variable quality is not a situation of her own choosing. Nor is it her fault, she reasons, that the school system is already quite segregated, or that families have such disparate amounts of social capital, or that the relevant material and non-material resources are in short supply and inequitably distributed. It also does not escape her notice that her brother, who lives in a more rural and homogeneous community further up the road, is not confronted with the same dilemma. Perhaps had she lived *there* rather than where she does, she might have been spared all of this emotional turmoil.

Meanwhile, each of her 'friends' knows very well of Lakshmi's (a) professed moral and political commitment to equity; (b) the highly diverse educational field in which she finds herself; but also (c) the real-world conditions of educational inequity, and inequity tout court. Each is rather introspective, and none is afraid to say what they think. They reheat the kettle and commence with their deliberations. Sasha is the first to speak.

Systemic Sasha. As a parent with two teenagers, Sasha is rather inclined to empathize with Lakshmi's quandary. However, she sees the bigger picture, and stresses the intractable systemic inequities. In point of fact, she views the moral quandary as a red herring, for the real problem is not ultimately one of individual choice or responsibility. Instead, the problem concerns the much larger socio-political and institutional context in which her choices must be made, a context containing not only unequal school experiences, but also extremes of poverty and wealth, a regressive tax code, disparate levels of social capital, a market logic to educational choice, and much else besides. The systemic realities being what they are, Sasha notes, Lakshmi is caught between a rock and a hard place. Accordingly, there is little choice but to play by the rules of the game, rules that are both unfair and not of her choosing. Moreover, because others are playing by the same rules – or rather, ignoring the rules altogether – it is unfair to expect her to do what others are unwilling to do. Her quandary is one in need of a political solution not in the offing. Failing that, collective action strategies are needed, yet sadly these are unavailable to her. That being the case, it is not unreasonable to do what she thinks best for her child; indeed, her motives appear to be in the right place. That being said, Sasha insists that Lakshmi must continue to tirelessly support the Lib Dems, since as a political party they most vocally champion the causes she cares about.

Principled Pam. Although she has strong opinions about the issue, Pam is somewhat hesitant to speak, knowing that she is the only friend in the group without children. Yet because she had a bit of philosophical training at university, she decides to focus on what she thinks are the flaws in Sasha's reasoning. While it is undeniably true that the playing field is not level, she begins, this *fact* does not provide Lakshmi with a compelling *reason* to choose as she did, any more than the *fact* that millions of people refuse to recycle or use public transportation provides one with a compelling *reason* for doing likewise. If you are to be morally serious, she winks mischievously to her friend, then you should be prepared to stand on principle, quite irrespective of what others are doing. Neither should

Lakshmi be permitted to console herself by voting Lib Dem, while acting in ways that flatly contradict her beliefs. In any case, Pam insists, complicity with injustice does not turn on the nobility of her motives. Indeed the fact that competitive motives appear to be absent in Lakshmi's case do not absolve her from moral blame if, in fact, her actions produce unfair advantages, or conversely exacerbate harms for others. Her worrying over the potential benefits and harms in her decision are therefore neither here nor there if, at the end of the day, she colludes in the existing inequality.

Cosmopolitan Chloe. Chloe recognizes the strengths of both positions on the table, and concurs with Pam that a vote for the Lib Dems may simply offer false comfort. But then an idea occurs to her, one that the others hadn't thought of. In one sense, Chloe begins, Lakshmi's quandary is about whether it is ever morally acceptable to have – or acquire – what others do not have. Here the issue at stake is obviously the quality of an education in a city of great disparity, and where school quality is highly variable. But suppose we look at this in global perspective, she continues, and consider the following: surely the fact that there are schools, teachers, books, laptops, notebooks, or whatever *at all* is itself unfair, given that a great many of the world's children have none of these things. In any case, why ought we to restrict Lakshmi's decision to the local context? After all, the inequities bearing upon this decision extend far beyond the local context, and not only to the rest of Britain, or the European Union, but indeed to the entire globe. She reminds Lakshmi that millions of immigrants flee their native countries not only to escape war, famine and economic hardship, but also so that their children might have a decent education, and thus a better life.

Alternative Agnes. Agnes interjects by suggesting that the solution, if there is one, is not to be found in the state school system. Not even the proliferation of academies and faith schools, she says, speak of what many parents want for their children. She relates an anecdote about a group of like-minded parents who found that the national curriculum omitted many things they most cared about, chiefly the arts and more attention to environmental concerns. In their shared exasperation, they had collectively decided to establish their own independent school. In order to cover costs, they first relied upon some initial fund raising, and also implemented a sliding fee scale for interested parents – most of whom were already comfortably middle class. The school's enrollment grew exponentially over its first decade, though she admits the type of family it attracted was fairly homogeneous. Yet whatever its shortcomings, Agnes shrugs, perhaps it is an option Lakshmi ought to consider, even if it means moving house. And why not at least contemplate homeschooling? Increasing numbers of parents, not a few of them frustrated parents like Lakshmi, have been doing that for some time.

Magnanimous Maud. Maud has been quietly taking it all in, vacillating between one view and another on the strength of each argument presented. She feels that Sasha's view concerning structural inequality lets Lakshmi too quickly off the hook. She agrees that Chloe is of course right that the implications are wider than previously thought, but thinks it unfair that Lakshmi ought to shoulder the concerns of the entire world. She also knows the school to which Agnes is referring, but notes disapprovingly that the school had long

ago acquired the reputation of being a white, elitist enclave. In any case, though other parents have certainly done it, moving house in order to access an alternative education seems escapist and extreme. Homeschooling, too, seems an unlikely choice given Lakshmi's fulltime employment. And about Pam, well, she ought to get off her high horse. What does she know anyway, until she has come face-to-face with the same agonizing decision?

A bit older than the others and mother of two grown children, Maud insists that Lakshmi's decision ultimately is not about her own self-interest, but rather concerns that which she believes is in her *child's* interest. Indeed as a parent, Lakshmi has a moral imperative to make her son's education paramount. This should be her first priority, she reasons, because she knows better than others what his interests are. And in considering his interests, Lakshmi must (a) weigh her son's interests against other interests or values (such as equity) that she may have; (b) rank or prioritize values when they conflict, as indeed they seem to in this case; and (c) reach a conclusion about what is best to do given the structural constraints, which, Maud concurs with Sasha, Lakshmi cannot change on her own.

Two hours later, Lakshmi is left feeling emotionally drained, and even more uncertain about what to do than she was before her guests arrived.

Part II

Lakshmi's moral quandary is doubtless familiar to equity-minded readers, many of whom will share some of her characteristics: parents, highly educated, middle to upper-middle class, possessing more than a modicum of understanding concerning how school systems – and the educational field more generally – work, including knowledge of alternatives *outside* the state school system. Like Lakshmi, many equity-minded readers, too, unflinchingly support the 'public option' in education, even if they deem the local options to be less-than-adequate for their own children and hence 'go private', or else procure by home purchase and geographic proxy a high-quality public education. Whatever the case, equity-minded readers will know that educational choices are not morally 'innocent' in the relevant sense, that is, in a world of limited resources and opportunities, parental behaviors can have real and insidious effects, irrespective of what one's intentions may be.

Suppose, then, that we were to come to Lakshmi's aid and examine the issue more philosophically. Below I briefly summarize two philosophical positions that explicitly frame the relevant moral questions vis-à-vis educational choice. Both philosophical positions place equity concerns front and center, and thus as it concerns school selection, each is committed to fair rules of play. The philosophers disagree, however, concerning what equity-minded parents should be permitted to do under real world conditions of educational inequity.

Position 1: Doing one's fair share

The first position is defended by Adam Swift (2003). He argues that equity-minded parents should be prepared to do their 'fair share', knowing that many others are much

worse off. In making educational choices for one's own children, one should therefore pause to consider how such choices may inadvertently exacerbate the situation of the less fortunate. While some parental behaviors, such as encouragement, reading bedtime stories, or offering helpful career advice, can be justified because they each express what it means to have an intimate relationship with one's child, other behaviors do not pass the sniff test.

For example, expensive private schools, Swift argues, violate basic equity standards because even when some scholarships or means-tested fees are made available, they generally are too few in number to allow more than token representation, and in any case do little to redress the larger structural issues. Moreover, because education is also a positional good, elite privates afford a quality of education to their lucky recipients that pay dividends in the form of more selective university placement and more favorable career prospects. Hence on Swift's argument, a parent who professes to care about equity should not 'jump the queue' by choosing such a school. Instead, one should be prepared to 'do one's fair share' in shouldering the burden of injustice, which, at a minimum, would include favoring the abolition of expensive private schools, as this gives parents of means a decidedly unfair advantage over others.

At the same time, Swift acknowledges that parents have special fiduciary duties toward their own child – which he articulates as *legitimate parental partiality* – duties that emanate from the family and are expressed in the form of parental prerogatives. Parental prerogatives include ensuring that one's child receive an 'adequate' education. Thus, when confronted with the many inequities *in the real world*, where parents may deem the local state school option to be inadequate, and where the moral failings of others prevent the kinds of collective action necessary to bring about the desired institutional change, the very same equity-minded parent may be justified in 'opting out' of that system in favor of an alternative. Indeed, Swift avers, parents may be morally permitted to do certain things under *unjust* conditions that they are not permitted to do under *just* conditions. Ironically, then, this means that a parent may even be justified in selecting an expensive private school, if and when she considers doing so the only means of guaranteeing an 'adequate' education for her child.

Position 2: Doing more than one's fair share

Taking issue with this view, Clayton and Stevens (2004) have argued that by consigning the meaning of 'adequate' to personal discretion, parents who profess to believe in equity are too easily permitted to rationalize opting out of the system, even when they know (a) that others are objectively worse off, and (b) by leaving the system, the situation of the disadvantaged arguably worsens further still. They allege that Swift is therefore being cavalier by adopting phrases like 'doing one's fair share'. Rather than waiting for improbable collective action scenarios to transpire, they instead exhort those caught in the moral quandary to be prepared to do 'more than their fair share', precisely *because* other parents are less likely to do so.

Invoking the principle of *solidarity*, they insist that justice requires equity-minded parents to repudiate the option to cleverly rationalize their behavior for their own child's benefit. Instead, equity-minded parents must demonstrate a willingness to accept an education for their child that they may even find *less* than adequate, given that (a) one's own

child already enjoys unearned advantages both in- and outside of the home, and (b) to refuse to ‘opt out’ is to improve the overall educational quality of the local school by making one’s own social capital – via social mixing – available to the less fortunate.

Appraisal. Discerning readers will note several problems with both positions. With respect to Swift’s position, if it is reasonable to expect that more educated parents will have an untenably high standard of ‘adequacy’, then Clayton & Stevens are surely right that we can expect them to more quickly justify their reasons for ‘opting out’, including – as Swift’s position conveniently allows – the option of choosing an expensive private school. Some (Tooley, 2007) have even argued that Swift’s view is particularly vulnerable to the charge of *moral complacency*, and not only because of how easily well-educated parents can rationalize their behavior. It is also susceptible to the charge knowing that many of the middle-class behaviors that particularly well-educated parents engage in with their children – earlier described as concerted cultivation – immeasurably improve the educational, and not infrequently socioeconomic, outcomes for their own children.

But Clayton & Stevens’ view is also problematic inasmuch as a preparedness to accept – in the name of ‘solidarity’ – an education for one’s own child that is ‘less than adequate’ is to be potentially negligent as a parent, even to the point of committing an injustice. If that is right, then a parent arguably would fail in one’s fiduciary duties as a parent. Moreover, there are several ways in which *both* views rest on a number of dubious empirical assumptions. For example, though not applicable in Lakshmi’s case, both views fail to address all of the ways in which a refusal to ‘opt out’ is irrelevant in many catchment areas given how homogeneous the ethnic/racial and socioeconomic geography is. Indeed, one’s place of residence often (but not always) serves as a proxy for school quality, and, for those with young children and more fiscal resources, place of residence also informs their school choice (Goldhaber, 1999; Holme, 2002).

Both views are also predicated on an empirically weak foundation, leaving us bereft of useful information needed for resolving the moral quandary. For instance, there are ample reasons to question their belief concerning how the social capital of more privileged children will benefit less privileged children, given the evidence concerning (a) the heavily tracked institutional design of most schools beyond the primary years (Merry and Boterman 2020; Domina et al., 2017; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993; Van der Werfhorst 2019); (b) the homophily effect among peers (Angrist and Lang, 2004; Fiel, 2013; McPherson et al., 2001); (c) how privileged parents game the system⁴ by insisting on their own child being advantaged (Calarco, 2018; Dumont et al., 2019; Saatcioglu and Skrtic, 2019), particularly when the school is mixed in terms of socioeconomic status and ethnicity/race (Diette et al., 2021; Francis and Darity, 2021; Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Merry and Agirdag, 2023); and finally, and perhaps most disturbingly, given (d) what we know about the somewhat limited impact on inequity that schools have relative to what occurs *outside* of schools, specifically in families and communities (Downey, 2020; Weininger et al., 2015). In the twenty-first century, this also includes a burgeoning and global multi-billion dollar shadow education⁵ industry (Entrich, 2020; Zhang and Bray, 2020), which serves to reinforce – rather than mitigate – existing structural inequalities, largely because the educational services are strictly available to those able to pay.⁶

While these empirical findings concerning the limited impact of schools on generating achievement gaps may be disquieting, they are not new. Nearly 60 years ago, sociologist James Coleman (1966) noted that schools chiefly appear to have an effect that is largely dependent upon the average family background, implying a stronger correlation of *shared family background in a school with achievement than to the characteristics of the school itself*. ‘Only if family backgrounds were homogeneous within schools’, he took pains to elucidate in his momentous report, ‘and if the school’s effect were highly correlated with family background, would a school maintain a correlation of achievement to family background’ (Coleman, 1966: 311). He clarifies the point thus:

This is not to say, of course, that schools have no effect, but rather that what effects they do have are highly correlated with the individual student’s background, and with the educational background of the student body in the school; that is, the effects appear to arise not principally from factors that the school system controls, but from factors outside the school proper. (Coleman, 1966: 311)

Coleman was the first to meticulously document the variance in achievement between children across multiple backgrounds and found, rather conclusively, that the greatest variation in achievement during the early years of school could be attributed to the objective conditions of the home. His findings, subsequently corroborated many times (e.g. Downey and Condron, 2016; Hill, 2017), further led him to conjecture that parental interest was highly correlated with secondary school achievement. In short, both shared family background and the quality of one’s peer group correlate the strongest with achievement, and not the school facilities, curriculum or teacher qualities.

Concluding this section, then, though both philosophical positions attempt to reconcile the paramount importance of parental prerogative on one hand, with an egalitarian commitment to equality of opportunity on the other, both efforts fail to resolve Lakshmi’s moral quandary. They fail not only because different political values, such as liberty and equality, appear to be at loggerheads, or because the details of individual circumstances require that we make prudential judgments on a case-by-case basis. Indeed the moral difficulties go much deeper than this, for they are inextricably tied to family life.

Part III

When we last saw Lakshmi she was feeling overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. A few weeks have since passed and her soul-searching exercise has come to an end, for she has made a decision. She invites the same friends once more for tea to share her news. Suffice it to say that Lakshmi has devoted far more time and energy to thinking about the matter than most parents ever do or will, and she knows this. Suffice it also to say that, whatever her choice, she has a battery of reasons at her disposal, not all of them terrifically different from what other parents would say, even if they hadn’t devoted the same amount of time to the decision.

For instance, she might say that she merely wants a quality education for her child, and made the best choice that she could from among the available options. Or, she chose an educational option that she thinks best given her son’s abilities and interests. If she

gets push back, she could rejoinder that she had simply exercised her legal entitlements just as other parents do. But even though she *could* parrot any of those things, she feels that she owes her friends more of an explanation than that. She motions for everyone to have a seat.

'I've taken seriously what each of you has had to say', she opens, 'but please, just hear me out'. Her friends find their places and fall obediently silent, and then reach for their cups and sip. 'We've got your back', they seem to be saying with their eyes, anticipating an interesting afternoon. Lakshmi looks both weirdly resolved and uncomfortable at the same time.

'There is indeed so much about the whole situation that I find unfair', she frets, 'but I simply cannot see how my child – or anyone else's – will change that. I know too much'. *Know too much?* the others wonder to themselves.

'Truthfully', she continues,

as someone who has worked the past 12 years in the local comp, I find that the quality of education is far below what I am willing to accept for my own child. He needs to be challenged, and most of all he needs motivated peers around him.

It begins to dawn on everyone where this is going.

'Look', Lakshmi stammers,

at the end of the day, as his mother I owe it to my son to find a school that (a) is 'not merely adequate'; and (b) that offers him a reliably good chance of attending a more selective university.

An awkward pause ensues. 'And soooo', she ominously draws out the vowel, 'I have decided to send my son to the private school across town', she says, to expressions of disbelief.

From the deafening silence she feels the disappointment, and not a little judgment, most of all from Pam. 'Please, don't judge me', she whimpers imploringly. She acknowledges the shock they must all be feeling. 'I am a little shocked myself', she confesses.

As if to head off their criticism, Lakshmi proceeds to explain that in making this difficult choice, she needed to feel confident that her son will receive a challenging education in a supportive environment. 'Of course he first must earn the scores needed for admission, but I can enroll him in a test prep course; other parents I know have done the same', she notes. 'The school fees, too, are rather steep, but I think I can manage it with his father's help and some belt tightening in other areas'.

Lakshmi wholeheartedly acknowledges to her friends that most children in her diverse city, including the local school where she teaches, do not have such an option. She is certain that most will attend the school nearest their home, whatever the quality of the school may be; or else they will attend a school that reflects their parents' faith or cultural background, which matters less to her personally. She further acknowledges all of the ways that she already provides unearned advantages to her son. Indeed she is painfully aware that his privilege is multiplied many times over owing to the benefits he receives from his more educated parents, not to mention his peer group in the jazz ensemble and lacrosse league.

‘But here’s the thing’, she concludes. ‘I no longer believe that my son’s absence will worsen the situation of other children’. She pauses for a moment before continuing. ‘Let’s face it’, she says, ‘he wouldn’t attend most of the same classes as the poorer kids anyway; I would make sure of that’, she candidly admits. Pam looks despairingly at the ceiling as she says this.

‘Don’t worry though’, Lakshmi adds reassuringly,

I shall continue to support the Lib Dems, believe me. And I’m not going anywhere; I shall continue to teach at the local comp, and devote myself to my students. But as his mother, I have to do what I think is best.

And that was that. The others glance at each other and slowly nod, digesting Lakshmi’s revelation. Sasha, gazing pensively out the window, now wonders whether their discussion weeks before hadn’t really been a pointless exercise. Agnes looks bemused, and Pam, predictably, a little miffed. However, Maud looks quite pleased, believing that her own advice had landed best. ‘You did the right thing’, her facial expression seems to be saying. Chloe decides to quickly change the subject.

‘No wait’, Lakshmi interrupts. ‘I’ve left out something important’. The others are hushed. ‘The best part, for me at least, is this: he told me the other day that he wants to become a doctor’, she says, now beaming with pride. ‘I must admit that hearing that made my choice much easier. And I just love the thought of him using his education to give back to society’. To Pam’s ears, this all sounds like opportune rationalization. ‘And suppose he wanted to be a corporate attorney?’ she muses jadedly to herself. But for the others, this last bit of information seems in some small way to redeem Lakshmi’s decision, though none had quite expected this outcome.

Ethical implications

The provocative question framing this ethical analysis concerns whether the educational choices that parents make actually matter, if in the final analysis inequalities between families are more decisive. To explore this, I began by highlighting the many inequities that are endemic to family life. I then posed the question whether choices made by equity-minded parents that arguably aggravate inequity can be morally justified, and if so on what grounds. To assist us in thinking through the ethical quandary, I constructed a scenario involving a fictional parent who wants what is best for her child, yet who also professes to having a principled commitment to equity.

If we momentarily suspend judgment, both the empirical and contextual evidence presented in the fictional case arguably suggests that Lakshmi – like any other parent – is not only within her legal rights to choose as she thinks best; more controversially, her reasons for choosing a more selective option for her own child also appear to have substantial warrant. First, her deliberations clearly imply deep moral conflict; indeed, she recognizes all too well the inequities that emanate from her own intellectual interests, networking abilities and parenting style, which contain all the features of Lareau’s concerted cultivation. Furthermore, and corroborating Coleman’s observations, she also knows that her parental behaviors yield real benefits for her son, benefits not available to many other children. Indeed, she knows that she is able to provide an assortment of cultural and social

capital, including her own bicultural capital. Finally, though it pains her to admit it, she knows that these advantages will reap further dividends by his attending an expensive, and very selective private school, where there is an institutional force majeure for academic success. Finally, in making such a decision, she knows that he stands a much better chance of getting into a selective medical school, perhaps even one abroad.

Moreover, Lakshmi does not merely presume things about local school quality based on things like league tables or word-of-mouth; rather, as a tenured teacher working many years within the system, she speaks from informed experience. Nor does she appear to have an objectionable competitive motive; instead, as a parent who loves her son, she wants what is best for him and is forced to choose from among a set of disparate options on a competitive educational field not of her choosing. And while she has not said as much to her friends, as a woman of color she has additional reasons at her disposal for improving her child's future prospects, knowing that he may face racial bias or discrimination down the line.

Even so, Lakshmi's decision may be read by some as disingenuous. Indeed, this is precisely why Pam believes her friend to be engaged in an exercise of clever rationalization, one that permits her to publicly virtue signal to others that she is troubled by inequity while making a decision that, by all appearances, looks selfish. Other readers may wonder whether Lakshmi's decision isn't also implicitly informed by classist and racist thinking. For though she is a woman of color herself, and has had her own unpleasant experiences with racism, in not entirely conscious ways she not only harbors negative attitudes toward certain minority groups; she also uses the ethnic and working-class student composition in her own school as a proxy for what she considers 'good enough'. And still others may wonder whether she hasn't justified her own hoarding of resources, the very thing she and others facilely accuse white middle-class parents of doing. Indeed, resource-hoarding seems particularly problematic in light of how much parents like Lakshmi do for, and with, their children *outside of school*: table talk, career advice, homework assistance, after school activities, museum visits, summer camps, foreign travel, and so on.

Be that as it may, Lakshmi's decision appears to enjoy strong philosophical support from Swift, whose unremitting defense of legitimate parental partiality⁷ means that Lakshmi has special fiduciary duties to her own child that she does not have to other children, duties that permit her to do many things for, and with, her child outside of school. As we have seen, these duties go to the very essence of the parent-child relationship; their paternalistic purpose is both to protect and promote a child's basic interests, interests that to an appreciable degree dovetail with those of the parent. Thus even with her professed concern for equity, she now reasons that she is doing nothing wrong by being an attentive and concerned mother, or wanting what is best for her child. Indeed, she takes renewed confidence in her decision, her spirits lifted by her son's announcement to become a doctor, an achievement beyond the wildest dreams of her immigrant parents. If she has any lingering doubts, these concern the fact that her son may be one of the few minorities at the private school, and she contemplates the possibilities of racist mistreatment, of him being used as a minority token, or perhaps of him being held to a different standard. She further worries about the attitudes of entitlement to which he will be exposed. Naturally, should her son's experiences prove too unpleasant, she can always reassess and choose a different school. Yet for the moment, and as his mother, she

resolves to balance his upbringing with a principled commitment to progressive values and a keen sense of awareness about where he comes from.

Swift might well quibble with Lakshmi's decision to opt for a school that is not only 'good enough' but also decidedly 'better than' other options. At the same time, Swift's concern to balance an education that is 'good enough' with the equity-seeking aim of 'doing one's fair share' allows Lakshmi considerable latitude for parental discretion. Moreover, to her belief that her son may face additional challenges as a racialized minority, Swift's accommodating position allows Lakshmi even more breathing room, as when he says: 'If the only way to give [a child] a fair chance is to give her a better than fair chance, so be it' (2003: 133).

In any case, invoking the principle of legitimate parental partiality allows parents like Lakshmi to give up nothing of real value, precisely because it is always possible to defend one's cultural and social capital as 'constitutive' of what it means to share a life with one's child. Indeed, as her own stylized deliberations reveal, educated parents are more likely than most to insist on a threshold of 'adequacy' that demands an elevated standard, one – in Swift's own words – that makes it *morally permissible* to do certain things under unjust conditions that are not permissible under more just conditions. And thus a higher threshold of adequacy means that more educated parents will take into consideration other things besides whether or not one's child has special needs, or is bullied or underchallenged. Like Lakshmi, they may include things like jazz ensemble and lacrosse; or more academically rigorous courses such as Latin, music theory and calculus; or opportunities to study abroad, receive private language instruction, etc.

Readers more sympathetic to Clayton and Stevens' arguably more radical appeal to 'solidarity' may still doubt whether Lakshmi is right about the difference her son's presence might have were he to remain in the local school. Yet as I noted earlier, they exhibit a certain empirical naïveté regarding the institutional realities of schools; accordingly they retain an unwarranted optimism concerning the impact on inequity that schools have relative to what occurs *outside* of schools, specifically in families and communities. As the empirical literature cited in the earlier appraisal section makes clear, factors like ability grouping/ tracking, (and a disparate teacher quality that strongly correlates with these institutional norms) peer group homophily, gaming the system behaviors among educated and more affluent parents, and most importantly the endless variety of educational pursuits outside of school, mean that the mere presence of more well-off students in comprehensive schools does not in itself improve those comprehensive schools or improve the education that less well-off children receive in those schools. This is because even when the *material* resources may be present, the *non-material* resources necessary for improving the educational performance of the disadvantaged are not. These resources, which often are found in schools that have tactically turned spatial concentration to advantage, include strong leadership, high teacher expectations, shared academic goals, a value-centered learning environment, empathic care, role-modeling and mentoring, and camaraderie among ethnic and racialized minority peers (Merry and Agirdag, 2023). Moreover, what 'solidarity' requires is complicated in a multicultural society. As the Lakshmi example shows, it is not clear whether this solidarity is class-based, race-based, culture-based or what; moreover, Lakshmi's desire to maximize the chances of her child

attending medical school can, indeed, be seen as a form of solidarity with her cultural (rather than social class) group.

If that is right, then when we return to the provocative question whether the educational choices that parents make actually matter if in the final analysis inequalities between families are more decisive, the answer would appear to be ‘no’.⁸ Lakshmi’s decision therefore appears to be *prima facie* morally justified.

Conclusion

Regardless of how one feels about this admittedly pessimistic conclusion, the empirical evidence canvassed in this article – not to mention hundreds of other uncited studies – cannot be ignored. As noted earlier, secondary education remains stubbornly stratified in most countries, including England, and is further segmented by ethnicity and race. Indeed tracking systems – whether *within* or *between* schools – ensure the same pattern, most especially when school populations are diverse. Peer groups and social networks, too, while occasionally mixed, veer toward homophily. And even the most insistent empirical researchers (e.g. Posey-Maddox et al., 2016) who posit that the collective actions of privileged parents assist in bringing more material resources – such as better facilities, curricular options, dietary provisions, additional staff – into hyper-diverse schools, reluctantly concede that most of the time these same ‘collective actions’ tend to exclude the interests of low-income students and their families.

And as Lakshmi’s school choice quandary illustrates, even when parents are equity-minded and their motives appear to be beyond reproach, fiduciary duties (and unconditional love) toward one’s child often entail an investment of material and non-material resources that serve to reinforce and perpetuate inequity. If these conclusions are correct, then they are unsettling. For in the final analysis, they force us to ask whether Lakshmi’s equity concerns, her parental motives, her thoughtful deliberations, her voting behavior, and even her choice of school matter much at all *if even the ‘right’ motivations, concerns and choices yield outcomes that are almost certain to reinforce the status quo*. Again, the answer appears to be ‘no’, precisely because family inequities appear to be more decisive, school systems the world over facilitate and reproduce these inequities, and even ostensibly moral principles permit – indeed encourage – parents to pass on their privileges to their children, both for the purposes of cultivating the parent-child relationship and advancing the child’s well-being. Readers undoubtedly will have different intuitions about the evidence canvassed in this article, the sincerity of Lakshmi’s deliberations, the range of realistic political and institutional solutions that can be devised, or even about realistic possibilities for collective action. Either way, I hope to have demonstrated that the scale of our current challenges vis-à-vis educational inequity is likely more insurmountable than many of us may want to believe. Indeed, the difficulties are so intractable that to oppose educational inequity *in principle* does not absolve equity-minded parents from colluding in its reproduction *in practice*.

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Notes

1. However, minority parent choice studies are growing in number (see Haynes et al., 2010; Pattillo, 2015; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021).
2. Similar to public charters, academies are generally comprehensives.
3. These moral intuitions are given additional weight insofar as they are expressed as legal rights enshrined in state constitutions, the European Convention on Human Rights [Art. 2], and even the Declaration on Human Rights [Art. 26.3].
4. Of course, even well-educated parents may not have ways to activate their social capital within the educational field if they are unfamiliar with how the field of choice operates (see Lareau, et al. 2016).
5. Shadow education is an umbrella term meant to capture a range of (typically paid for) educational activities that occur outside of schools, yet which yield clear benefits for students while in school.
6. This does not mean, however, that poor parents are not willing or able to make sacrifices to access these services.
7. A position Swift has subsequently defended many times (e.g. Brighthouse and Swift, 2009; Swift, 2004, 2005).
8. Swift (2003) appears to concede this point himself: ‘in almost all real world situations, the benefits to others of sending your child to an inadequate school will not be great enough to justify doing so’ (p. 114).

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