

Philosophical Inquiry in Education

PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN EDUCATION
An International Journal of Educational Inquiry

On Educational Excellence

Lorella Terzi

Volume 27, Number 2, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074040ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074040ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Terzi, L. (2020). On Educational Excellence. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 27(2), 92–105. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074040ar>

Article abstract

In recent decades, the pursuit of excellence, broadly defined as high educational achievement, has shaped the education systems and the research agendas of many countries across the world. Schools have been encouraged to provide a world-class quality education, with an emphasis on outstanding performance for some students, alongside a general improvement of outcomes for all. Educational excellence is however a very debated ideal. Given the complexities of defining 'excellence,' questions arise about its precise meaning in relation to achievement but also, and importantly, about its significance for education. This paper examines excellence as an ideal for education policy and the reasons for pursuing it. It suggests that educational excellence ought to be conceived in ways that are conducive to a general aim of well-being for all, in various abilities that lead to valuable pursuits, with due consideration of the importance of high achievement in relation to individuals' specific aptitudes.

On Educational Excellence

LORELLA TERZI

University of Roehampton, London

In recent decades, the pursuit of excellence, broadly defined as high educational achievement, has shaped the education systems and the research agendas of many countries across the world. Schools have been encouraged to provide a world-class quality education, with an emphasis on outstanding performance for some students, alongside a general improvement of outcomes for all. Educational excellence is however a very debated ideal. Given the complexities of defining 'excellence,' questions arise about its precise meaning in relation to achievement but also, and importantly, about its significance for education. This paper examines excellence as an ideal for education policy and the reasons for pursuing it. It suggests that educational excellence ought to be conceived in ways that are conducive to a general aim of well-being for all, in various abilities that lead to valuable pursuits, with due consideration of the importance of high achievement in relation to individuals' specific aptitudes.

Introduction

In recent decades, governments of industrialized countries across the world have promoted the value of excellence, broadly defined as high educational achievement, in light of its contribution to economic and technological growth, social development, and individuals' well-being. The pursuit of excellence has been combined with a concern for improving the achievement of all students, given the pervasive inequalities of outcome that characterize many schooling systems. In response, policies have been introduced to improve overall achievement, while research and international programs have focused on standardized test results in core subjects¹—usually literacy, mathematics, and science—which are used as proxy for the quality of education systems.

Notwithstanding its centrality in policy and research, and despite a broad consensus on the importance of achievement, the value of educational excellence is highly debated. Two questions are particularly important for compulsory education: determining the precise meaning of excellence as a quality or measurement of achievement, and specifying which abilities to foster to high levels and why. While policies mainly adopt vague notions of high achievement that remain unclear in the absence of further specification, positions in the debate vary and include, for example, definitions in terms of exceptional or prodigious levels of performance, usually attained only by highly able students (Gillies, 2007; Winstanley, 2006). Moreover, the use of standardized test scores in core subjects raises concerns about the reduction of achievement, and therefore excellent achievement, to a narrow set of measurable outcomes, mainly related to knowledge and cognitive abilities, which is seen as severely compromising the significance of a broad and balanced education. Questions therefore arise about determining whether

¹ The OECD's Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), for example, focus on test scores in reading, mathematics, and science to evaluate the quality of schooling systems in member countries worldwide (OECD 2012, 2015, 2019).

educational excellence should consist primarily in high achievement in knowledge and cognitive skills, or in other abilities too, and whether only in core subjects, or in a broader range of disciplines (Duru-Bellatt and Mingat, 2011; Gillies, 2007).

Underpinning these questions is an important normative dimension, which includes not only considering the implications that any conception of excellence in education might yield in relation to who will achieve at high level² and the benefits entailed, but also considerations on the purpose of pursuing excellence itself. A conception related uniquely to improving the economic benefits provided by those achieving at a high level would presumably be different from one aimed at promoting the well-being of individuals and the overall improvement of their social frameworks. Thus, considering the value of excellence in education implies normative judgements, which extend to the role of education and to what kind of schools, and ultimately, society, we ought to promote.

In this paper, I examine excellence³ as an ideal for education policy. More specifically, in light of the problems identified in educational debates, I address the question of how excellence ought to be defined in relation to achievement, and the reasons as to why it should be pursued. My core position is that educational excellence should be conceived of in terms of high achievement in a broad range of abilities, including intellectual, aesthetics, and physical ones, which are at once valuable for the individual and for society, while promoting an overall aim of well-being.

Considering excellence as an ideal for education policy implies understanding it as regulative and hypothetically action-guiding in the sense of ‘probing the limits of practical possibility’ without, however, expecting its realization to be fully enacted in practice (Swift and Stemplowska, 2012, p. 379). Thus, the conception presented, alongside the distinctions and specifications suggested, are deemed to be hypothetical and regulative tools that might help policy move toward their enactment, but without implying their full realization in practice⁴.

The paper is organized in three sections. In the first, I provide a short overview of policies in relation to the questions emerging from educational debates, and, in the second section, I address some of the inherent complexities of defining excellence in education. I then propose, in the third section, elements of an ideal conception of excellence and the reasons for supporting it, while considering a possible objection. Finally, I conclude by providing some insights in response to the questions identified in educational debates.

1. Educational Excellence in Policy and Debates

For over four decades now, the pursuit of educational excellence has informed national policies, particularly in the US and the UK, and international initiatives such as the OECD’s PISA Programme.

² The recent case of the algorithm chosen to assess A Levels Exams in England, which led to pervasive unfair results, particularly in relation to results for schools in deprived areas, is an example of the moral dimension implied in some of these questions. See Taylor, 2020.

³ Throughout the paper, I use the term excellence to mean a quality or measure of educational achievement and as synonymous of high achievement. Moreover, since the discussion relates to policy, excellence is considered as a property of the system and not just as the performance of an individual student (Brighouse, 2010, p. 40).

⁴ This understanding pertains to ideal theory, whose goal, epistemically, is ‘systematic knowledge and understanding of the values’ (Swift and Stemplowska, 2012, p. 379).

Schools have been encouraged to provide a world-class quality education, with an emphasis on high achievement and the general improvement of outcomes for all. This has prompted intense debates on the meaning and value of educational excellence. In this section, I present some elements of key policy texts in relation to the problems raised in educational debates, with a view to highlighting the main issues at stake.

Among the numerous policy texts⁵ on excellence at national level, two documents perhaps exemplify the core of the excellence agenda: the US Report, *A Nation at Risk*, published in 1983 under the first Reagan presidency, and the UK White Paper *Excellence in Schools* issued in 1997 by the New Labour government (Gillies, 2007; Urban, Jennings, & Wagoner, 2014). Both are worth a closer analysis in relation to the definitions of excellence they adopted, since these have informed further policies and programs until the present day.

The US Federal Report, *A Nation at Risk*, was issued in order to respond to a perceived critical decline in American education standards, and it was influenced by the then emerging movement for school improvement. The Report importantly advanced the goal of pursuing excellence at three levels, namely at individual, school, and society levels. Individual excellence was identified in terms of “performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits” (National Committee, 1983, p. 12), whereas at the school or college level, excellence referred to setting high levels of expectations and goals for all students. Finally, high standards were seen as required by society to respond to the complex demands of a changing world (National Committee, 1983, p. 12). The Report further introduced a rigorous use of standardized tests in core subjects in order to account for school improvement.

In the UK, the emphasis on excellence emerged only in 1997 with the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997), issued by the then newly elected Labour government. The Paper announced the government’s strong commitment to excellence in education and it identified the main problem of the education system in the following terms:

Excellence at the top is not matched by high standards for the majority of children. We have some first-class schools and our best students compare with the best in the world. But by comparison with other industrialized countries, achievement by the average student is just not good enough. (DfEE, 1997, p. 10)

Labour’s commitment to excellent achievement extended from students ‘at the top’ to all students by explicitly introducing the conception of excellence for all. As the Paper stated: “our aim is excellence for everyone” (DfEE, 1997, p. 12), to be achieved by adopting a zero tolerance of underperformance and promoting high standards in test scores (DfEE, 1997, p. 19). These elements, furthermore, informed the large number of policies on excellence implemented by the Labour government for well over a decade.

The emphasis on excellence being central to these two policies has continued throughout the years until the present day, albeit primarily in terms of the commitment to improving standards of achievement, measured through high-stakes testing in core skills, and closing the ‘achievement gap’ between lower

⁵ The number of policies on excellence, in the US and particularly the UK is considerable and a full discussion is not feasible in this paper. See, for example, Urban et al, 2014; Gilles, 2007, 2008 for extensive discussions of policy texts.

achieving students and those attaining highly. Some national policies, however, explicitly retain the pursuit of excellence, while emphasizing the improvement of educational outcomes for underachieving groups.⁶

The pursuit of excellence is currently central also in initiatives at the international level, particularly in the OECD PISA Programme (Van den Branden, Avermaet, & Van Houtte, 2011). Launched in 1997, PISA, in the words of OECDs' General Secretary Angel Gurría, "has become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems" and is "not only an accurate indicator of students' abilities to participate fully in society but also a powerful tool that countries and economies can use to fine-tune their education policies" (OECD, 2012, p. 3). The Programme provides comparative measurements of educational achievement at age 15 in Reading, Mathematics, and Science, based on standardized test scores. It adopts six levels of proficiency, with level six expressing excellent achievement and, although each level is specific to the skills and discipline assessed, all levels of proficiency are broadly comparable in terms of descriptors across skills.

Despite the long-standing debates and the strong critiques of the validity of PISA assessments, it is perhaps worth noting how PISA has adopted the main elements of the excellence policies and expanded them onto the current international education arena (D'Agnese, 2017; Van den Branden et al. 2011).

While the central role of excellence as high achievement in the policies and initiatives explored is evident, two main elements characterize them: the adoption of a vague notion of excellence and a strong emphasis on the use of standardized tests for measuring educational achievement⁷. Thus, debates in education highlight limitations and problems pertaining to both.

First, debates highlight how definitions such as "performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits" (National Committee, 1983, p. 12) or "high standards" of achievement (DfEE, 1997, p. 12), which characterize these policies, while extending to many others⁸, remain imprecise. They are also difficult to make operational without further specifications, as are notions of high aspirations, the fulfillment of the student's potential or 'developing ... individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost' (National Committee, 1983, p. 19; Gillies, 2007, 2008; Duru-Bellat and Mingat, 2011).

In addition to concerns about the imprecise use of notions, questions arise about how to qualify excellence as measure of achievement. As Strike (1983) and Gillies (2007), among others, note, excellence in relation to high achievement can be specified in two ways. First, as norm-referenced, and therefore in terms of individual achievement in comparison with the performance of peers. In this case, excellence is expressed in terms of scoring at the highest percentile. Second, excellence can also be specified as criterion referenced, thus in relation to a specific criterion which has been met, as "when we say that a

⁶ For example, US programs such as The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics (2015), and The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (US Department for Education, 2020.) aim to increase educational opportunities, improve outcomes, and ensure that Hispanic and African American students receive an education that prepares them for college, productive careers and satisfying lives. In England, the emphasis on excellence has informed the large ongoing project of transforming schools, and particularly secondary schools, in academies, independent of public accountability, with the aim of improving standards of achievement in areas of social disadvantage (Academies Commission, 2013), whereas the excellence agenda is explicitly more central in Scotland.

⁷ A further element relates to the twinning of the pursuit of excellence with that of equality, an aspect of the policy that will be analyzed in a separate paper.

⁸ Most policies on excellence in the UK, for example, adopt this definition, See for example, DfEE (2007); DfEE (2009); DfEE (2016). The latter White Paper was not implemented.

specific student has reached proficiency or has met grade level expectations” (Guskey, 2013, p. 4). Each of these specifications would lead to different outcomes in terms of who would achieve highly.

Others, however, as stated earlier, refer to excellence solely in terms of exceptional and extraordinary standards of achievement, attained mainly by students identified as highly able, thus introducing elements of giftedness in the debate on definitions (Winstanley, 2006). More on this later.

Second, questions arise about determining whether excellence should consist primarily in high achievement in cognitive skills measured in core subjects (Duru-Bellatt & Mingat, 2011). This concern, as mentioned earlier, reflects the view that considering excellent achievement solely on the basis of what can be measured by test scores, and therefore on the basis of a limited set of cognitive skills, undermines the significance of education, since education involves many important but less measurable dimensions, such as the development of dispositions and interests, as well as varied abilities, in addition to cognitive skills (Biesta, 2020; Duru-Bellatt & Mingat, 2011; D’Agnese, 2017). Although PISA adopts a specific definition of excellence expressed in percentages for each participant state, and more precise indicators of measurement than most policies, its focus on standardized test scores, and its comparison of the excellence of education systems across different countries with very different characteristics, raise all the concerns identified, with the additional critique of globally undermining those educational achievements that are less measurable and yet are essential to what education is and ought to be about.⁹

It is perhaps clear from the discussion so far that the definition of excellence in education and its pursuit raise difficult questions which are longstanding and yet still current. The next section addresses some of these questions in more details.

2. Defining Educational Excellence

Defining educational excellence, as we have seen, is complex and fraught with difficulties. Before considering the question of what kind of excellence, as high achievement, we should ideally be promoting and why, a few difficult distinctions and clarifications are in order. These relate to both, how to conceive of excellence, whether as high or prodigious achievement, and how specifically to qualify it in education. Finally, the relative nature of any conception must also be acknowledged.

Perhaps the problems of defining excellence in education relates, to a certain extent, to the complex and rather nebulous nature of the concept of excellence itself. Some brief considerations on the latter might therefore be helpful.

In his monograph, *Can we be excellent and equal too?*, John Gardner (1961) notes that excellence can be achieved in different fields, for example, in music, or in communication, or in craftsmanship, or in parental duties and other fields. Despite this variety, Gardner notes that a notion of excellence relates invariably to socially acceptable activities while excluding anti-social ones (Gardner, 1961); for example, excellence is not usually associated with an activity such as embezzlement. Furthermore, although each field has a specific canon of excellence, since, for example, we value an excellent piano in relation to canons that are different to those used in judging an excellent novel, underpinning different excellent achievements is an overall positive connotation (Gillies, 2007).

⁹ In 2014 a group of academics worldwide wrote a public letter to the PISA programme director highlighting these concerns (see: OECD and Pisa tests are damaging education worldwide - academics, 2014).

Two further elements are also worth specifying: first, the notion of excellence implies a hierarchical ordering, an element of superiority, or reaching the top,¹⁰ reflected, for example, in common expressions, used also in education, such as achieving 'the highest heights' or 'scaling the heights', or 'reaching the top' of a certain activity or field. Second, a judgement of excellence involves a comparison. For example, if we state that some are excellent basketball players while others are average ones, we are comparing levels of ability to perform. What is to be noted, however, is that, in the absence of specifications, the notion of excellence remains rather opaque while still entailing a sense of high accomplishment.

These general connotations apply to the concept of educational excellence in relation to high achievement, which certainly entails a positive appraisal (despite the controversies about its specific meaning) as well as elements of grading and comparison. We value, for example, a high-quality essay demonstrating an original application of a certain theory, or an aesthetically accomplished dance performance, and so on, and such an evaluation is made in comparison to other essays or performances and in relation to specific canons.

Defining educational excellence, however, as we have seen, involves making some further distinctions in relation to student achievement. Two, in particular, are important: the first concerns whether to consider excellence somehow as synonymous with high achievement or instead uniquely in terms of extraordinary levels of performance, while the second pertains to determining precisely how to qualify excellence as a high level of achievement. Let us consider each issue more closely.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the question of equating excellence in education with extraordinary or prodigious abilities is mainly expressed within the debates about highly able students (Winstanley, 2006), but it does not seem to be central in the broader debate addressed earlier. This notwithstanding, and regardless of the difficulties of identifying highly able children (Merry, 2004), in my view educational excellence should be considered as synonymous of high achievement, albeit appropriately qualified. Defining excellence solely with regard to exceptionality, for example, the amazing early achievement of students exhibiting prodigious musical capacities, would be limiting and perhaps unhelpful, since it would exclude the vast majority of students who reach high levels of attainment but do not present with unusual or prodigious capacities (however the latter are identified and defined), and this high level of achievement is perhaps what excellence in education ought to be mostly about. Furthermore, highly able children are not a homogenous group and, while many achieve highly in some abilities, others seem to experience difficulties which hinder their achievement (Merry, 2004). Ultimately, a conception of excellence in terms of high achievement may be more appropriate to schooling, in that it would allow for high achievement to be considered in relation to the general school population, while perhaps including exceptional and prodigious levels of performance, but without being necessarily limited to them. In short, excellence as high achievement could include all high-quality performances.

Understanding educational excellence as somehow synonymous with high achievement, however, requires some further distinctions, pertaining to the judgement of precisely what level of achievement might be deemed excellent. Here it is perhaps worth noting, in addition to the critiques presented earlier, that conceiving of educational excellence in terms of performance in high-stakes testing has led to notions

¹⁰ This connotation relates to the origin of the word excellence in the Latin '*excellere*' which translates in terms of to excel or to surpass, be superior, be eminent as well as to rise high, or reach a top, resulting in the usage of expressions such as reaching the top or achieving the highest heights. To be excellent is therefore a "mark or trait of superiority, that in which something or someone excels" (Oxford Dictionary of Etymology, 1966). For others, however, it relates to the ancient Greek term of *arete*, which translates as both excellence and virtue.

of ‘standards of excellence’, which usually express what can be measured rather than the quality of specific achievements and thus, according to some, inherently altering the nature of the term excellence itself (Duke, 1985, p. 672). Educational excellence, therefore, might be more appropriately related to the quality of the achievement, rather than a quantitative measurement.

Although these matters should be the subject of careful evaluation by policy makers, and their extensive analysis is not feasible in this paper, in my view, a criterion specifying the quality of high achievement unrelated to test scores might best express excellence as high achievement. For example, such a criterion could aim to identify elements of originality and creativity in addition to the mastery of knowledge and skills in specific areas, and the ability to apply these in new ways and to different problems. Although this formulation is certainly not novel, and it would require further precision to be implemented in practice, it might help in specifying excellence in terms of the quality of high achievement without a unique recourse to quantitative measurements.

There is, finally, another important dimension to any understanding of excellence and this pertains to its relativity. As Gardner noted “[A]t any given time in a particular society, the idea of what constitutes excellence can be limited – but the conception changes as we move from one society to another” (Gardner, 1961, p. 138).

This pertains also to the conception of excellence in education. Excellence as a measure of educational achievement, like achievement itself, can be considered relative or context-dependent at three main levels, namely in relation to specific social frameworks, as well as to the design of schooling systems and, at least certainly under standardized forms of assessment, also to the performance of peers. Thus, for example, in complex industrialized societies, cognitive skills in literacy, numeracy and information technology as well as communicative abilities are very highly valued, given their importance for the labor market and the general organization of society. This implies that high achievements in these areas are not only highly considered and rewarded, but they are those mainly promoted. Relatedly, the specific design of schooling, and the curriculum too, have an impact on excellence: selecting certain disciplines and devoting more (or less) educational resources to the development of certain abilities will affect levels of achievement and it will determine the general level of those capacities in society. It will also determine which ones are valued and the level at which they are required for accessing various positions (Satz, 2007). Finally, according to the different forms of assessment used, levels of excellence will depend on the broad performance of peers; for example, if achievement is measured through standardized tests, the algorithm used to calculate scores will have an impact on how levels of excellent achievement are determined. Excellence refers therefore to the performance of the reference groups against which it is assessed. Ultimately, educational excellence as high achievement has a relative dimension, and this dimension is especially important for any policy enactment.

To sum up. I have so far considered some of the complexities of defining educational excellence, and I have endorsed an understanding of excellence in terms of high achievement, specified through a qualitative criterion. I have further outlined how, in considering an understanding of excellence specifically in relation to policy, its context-dependent nature needs to be acknowledged. There are, however, other fundamental questions concerning the meaning of excellence in education, which imply important value judgements. An ideal conception of excellence might provide valuable insights towards addressing these matters, and this is my task in the next section.

3. Educational Excellence: An Ideal Conception

Determining a conception of excellence for education policy involves questions of a normative nature, pertaining to what kind of excellence we ought to promote, for example whether only in intellectual abilities or in a broader range of skills, and the reasons in support of these choices.

My aim in this section is to offer an initial response to these questions, at the ideal level and in relation to the fundamental role of education. In particular, my core position is that excellence should be conceptualized in ways that are conducive to a general aim of well-being for all, in line with the view that what fundamentally matters in education should be providing opportunities for leading good lives and improving society too.¹¹ Thus, I suggest an expansive and plural conception of excellence consisting in high educational achievement in a range of capacities, including intellectual, aesthetics, and physical ones, to be attained in various educational pursuits, with due consideration to the importance of high achievement for those individuals particularly skilled in specific activities. Two reasons support this conception: the first pertains to the value that developing individuals' abilities to excellent levels entails for their well-being and the general well-being of all, while the second relates to considerations about students' heterogeneity, and hence to students' different capacities, interests, and attitudes, and their relevance for education.

Before substantiating these claims, however, the view that the fundamental aim of education should consist of equipping students to lead good lives requires some brief elaboration. The core of the view is that education has a foundational function, which consists in fostering the student's development, both as an individual and as a member of society (Nussbaum, 2009). Whether characterized mainly in relation to acquiring valuable knowledge, skills and understandings, or transforming latent human potentialities into positive capacities which lead to human flourishing (Allen, 2016, p. 13), education fundamentally promotes the development of students and it has an important role for the kind of individuals they will become, and how well their lives will go (Brighouse, Ladd, Loeb and Swift, 2018; Fishkin, 2016). This role is particularly significant during childhood, since many capacities, for example, are developed during this phase of life and are more difficult to achieve as adults. Educational institutions should therefore provide opportunities and create the conditions for students' development, thus fostering their evolving ability of autonomous self-determination as they near adulthood, and ultimately promote well-being. Although, philosophically, well-being is characterized differently by different perspectives, I rely on the widely accepted understanding of well-being as ultimately concerned with how well the life of a person is going, according to her own view. Living well, therefore, relates to the possibility of pursuing valued life plans, in line with each individual's different dispositions, interests, and capacities, while participating in a variety of ways in one's social framework.

On these bases, I now turn to consider each of the two reasons supporting my suggestion of a plural and expansive conception of excellence, namely the inherent contribution that high achievement offers in terms of well-being, and considerations of student's heterogeneity.

How might the development of abilities to excellent levels promote a general aim of well-being? An example provided by Christine Sypnowich in support of her conception of flourishing may help in establishing the contribution of high achievement for individual well-being and the well-being of others

¹¹ I endorse a liberal perfectionist conception of education, which holds that education should contribute to the promotion of individual well-being and living good lives.

(Sypnowich, 2017). Sypnowich reconsiders philosopher Robert Nozick's notable thought experiment of Wilt Chamberlain in order to highlight the particular value of the mastery of high capacities. In the original thought experiment, Chamberlain, an excellent basketball player, agrees to play for a specific team on condition that anyone watching the game pays him a sum of money. Given the vast number of people attending the game and willing to pay additionally in order to watch him play, Chamberlain is left better off than any other player (Nozick, 1974/2001). According to Sypnowich, "the example's power comes from our intuition about the value of development and display of athletic skills," rather than from the benefits accrued to Chamberlain by the deployment of his excellent achievement as a player (Sypnowich, 2017, p. 121). Sypnowich rightly maintains that "it is because all human beings are entitled to a life of well-being that [...] he [*Chamberlain*] is entitled to develop and express his talents" (Sypnowich, 2017, p. 121). In short, Chamberlain's well-being is achieved when he can develop and further exercise his high capacities and excellent achievement as a player, and this may well include his own enjoyment of the game and the public appreciation and recognition that he receives.

Similarly, one may think of the value that excellent achievement in mathematics might have played, for example, in the life of Katherine Johnson, a mathematician who worked for NASA and, in the late 1960s calculated the trajectory needed for a spaceship to reach the moon and return to earth, which led to the Apollo 11 mission. Johnson recalled her interest for mathematics and the development of her abilities at school, which resulted in subsequent educational choices and high achievements (Strauss, 2020).

These examples, and no doubt many similar ones could be provided, aim to show that excellent achievement, for those especially skilled in certain activities, contributes to well-being, not only in terms of personal fulfilment, but also in leading to opportunities such as gaining degrees and other accomplishments, which in turn might result in a wider range of choice and rewarding occupations. In short, achieving at high levels can contribute to both intrinsic and instrumental benefits for the individual, and this pertains to the development of intellectual abilities as well as to a broader range of skills in various activities, as the examples above have highlighted.

Furthermore, the promotion of excellent achievement has a broader impact. This pertains to the essential contribution that the development of capacities to high levels provides for the general benefit of all and the improvement of society. As Sypnowich and others aptly note, those achieving highly provide discoveries, ideas, and activities that enhance society's levels of knowledge, technological and economic innovation, culture and practice, thus improving the overall quality of life and the well-being of all (Satz, 2007, p. 633; Sypnowich, 2017). The general improvement provided by the excellent achievements of some seems to be a genuine case of 'trickle down,' whereby the 'social surplus' provided by excellence can overall improve the life prospects and the well-being of those achieving at lower levels (Satz, 2007, p. 633; Sypnowich, 2017, p. 121). These considerations ultimately extend the value of excellent achievement to the wider enhancement of the well-being of all.

The second and interrelated reason in support of an ideal and plural conception of excellence concerns students' heterogeneity. Although students differ in their abilities, interests, dispositions, and ambitions,¹² generally each will have some capacities that can be achieved at excellent levels, for example some students will be better at science while others at critical understanding and so forth (Hurka, 1993, p. 167). Promoting the achievement of high levels in a broad range of capacities, including intellectual,

¹² These elements are all the result of a complex interrelation of individual and environmental factors (Fishkin, 2016). This consideration has significant implications for questions of justice and equality in education.

artistic, and physical ones would, in ideal circumstances, open diverse paths to excellence and, relatedly, to the fulfillment that this entails for a wide number of students, while promoting the enhancement of society too (Allen, 2016). Hence, each student should be supported to develop his or her capacities to high levels, particularly in those activities in which they can excel.

Recall here the examples of Chamberlain and Johnson: while their excellent achievements lie in different domains and imply different abilities, both are at once exemplary and presumably leading to overall good lives while improving society. As Scanlon suggests, “an environment in which one is led to see a plurality of lives as having value is another part of the kind of opportunity that everyone should, ideally, have” (Scanlon, 2018, p. 35), and this, in my view, extends to the kind of value that different excellent achievements in different pursuits should ideally have in education.

For these reasons, in ideal terms, an education aimed at well-being should foster the promotion of excellent levels of achievement in a range of abilities and in varied activities, which are part of a broad and balanced education aimed at promoting well-being. Pursuing a plurality of excellent accomplishments would allow at once valuing the achievements of a diverse student population and recognizing the importance that different high achievements have for those especially skilled in specific activities.

This broad stipulation requires, however, some more precise elaboration, particularly in relation to the general development of students’ abilities and alongside those specifically pursued at high levels, as well as in relation to how and when to identify which abilities to be developed to highly levels.

More specifically, an education aimed at well-being requires the development of a broad range of capacities needed to lead a good life, while actively participating in one’s framework. Thus, offering each student opportunities to develop some of his or her abilities to excellent levels, in line with the conception suggested, should not exclude the pursuit of a common core of abilities, shared across the student population that each student, regardless of their specific skills and dispositions, should develop to the level required for living well. While the common core would depend on the design of social arrangements, it is plausible to suggest that it should equip students to be able to participate fully in their social frameworks, and to the level required for citizenship with its complex duties and rights (Author, 2008). Alongside this common core, a more differentiated and specific one should be promoted, developing students’ specific abilities to high level, and “linking up with the ambition of smaller groups of students, after leaving compulsory education, whether geared towards participation in specific programs in higher education or participation in certain segments of the labor market” (Van den Branden et al., 2011, p. 9; Duru-Bellat and Mingat, 2011).

Furthermore, it may be plausible to consider that specific capacities should be especially fostered to high levels once students have had opportunities to explore a range of activities and the development of related abilities. Thus, although specific aptitudes and capacities may be identified early in students’ schooling, perhaps their specific pursuit to high levels might be more appropriate in later phases of education and the dual core of common and specialist abilities should be promoted, for example, at secondary school level. This should exclude, at least in principle, the unilateral promotion of a narrow range of abilities, say for example only excellent physical skills, at the expense of all other valuable achievements.

This latter consideration, however, does not respond to the case of students showing early prodigious levels of capacities, as these may require ‘sacrificing’ other areas of possible development in order to be fully fostered. In this case, perhaps parental decisions and appropriate personalized pathways should be considered and identified, in consultation with the student.

Finally, a further specification concerns the identification of those specialist abilities that should be developed at high levels. Here again, it might be reasonable to propose that a concerted decision involving students, parents, and educators could facilitate the identification of which capacities each student could be encouraged to develop to levels of excellence.

To sum up, I have argued that an ideal conception of educational excellence should consist in the promotion of high levels of achievement in a range of abilities, including intellectual, artistic, and physical ones, in various educational activities, with particular consideration to the significance of high achievement for students' different aptitudes, and the general aim of promoting their present and long-term prospects for well-being.

Whilst this conception is presented in ideal terms, two caveats are in order. First, should the pursuit of high achievement become detrimental to students' engagement with learning and hinder their well-being, for example by creating excessive anxiety, or by exercising undue pressure against students' own dispositions, then other considerations may need to take precedence and the promotion of well-being be prioritized. In other words, should the need for trade-offs between the achievement of excellence and that of well-being emerge, priority should be given to the latter on grounds of its fundamental importance.

Second, the enactment in policy of the conception suggested requires some consideration too. The expansive and plural understanding of educational excellence outlined is conceived of in ideal terms and therefore, as stated at the outset, without expecting its concrete realization in practice. Any conception of excellence aimed at guiding action in non-ideal circumstances would need to carefully assess and judge, for instance, which abilities and at what level they ought to be developed in relation to the specific context and the institutional design of any social arrangements. Thus, educational excellence would need to be considered as relative to the knowledge, skills, and capacities that best promote the well-being of individuals and the enhancement of society in a concrete and real context with its specific social, economic, and cultural features and the related values and demands, as pointed out in the previous section.

A final matter is also worth considering. The expansive conception of educational excellence presented raises some objections. One, in particular, is important, and I now turn to consider it briefly. The objection pertains to the claim that the pursuit of excellence, in general but in education too, is at odds with the aim of promoting well-being. Aiming for an excellent achievement in itself might detract from the value inherent to an activity, the claim states, and it might therefore render the activity entirely instrumental to the actual 'rewards' entailed by achieving at high level, which will diminish well-being altogether (Sypnowich, 2017). Relatedly, therefore, education should aim to promote good-enough achievements for the whole student population and abandon the pursuit of excellence altogether. Two considerations might be offered here. First, perhaps the force of this objection pertains more to the ways in which the pursuit of excellence is enacted and the specific design of schooling systems in current societies, given the narrow set of capacities fostered and the high rewards they may command in society, like entrance to prestigious institutions or well-paid positions. Second, there may be no reasons, in principle, as to why aiming for the cultivation of abilities to high levels would necessarily lead to a general decrease of well-being for the individual, unless such a promotion, as I have said earlier, is enacted against the student's own dispositions or strongly enforced for instrumental reasons in the first place. The promotion of specific abilities to high levels, on the contrary, can be seen as inherently leading to personal fulfilment, since individuals usually find the cultivation of the capacities in which they are especially skilled highly rewarding (Hurka, 1993). A plural and expansive view of excellence could, moreover, facilitate

students' personal fulfillment by providing different paths to high achievement, thus ultimately widen the possible contribution to their well-being.

Conclusion

Educational excellence, as we have seen, is complex and debated. In this paper, I have examined excellence as an ideal for education policy by addressing two questions: how excellence ought to be conceived in relation to achievement and for what purpose it should be pursued. In response, I have advanced an expansive and plural conception of excellence, identified in relation to a general aim of well-being for all, consisting in the promotion of high achievements in a range of abilities, including intellectual, aesthetics, and physical ones, to be attained in various valuable activities and with due attention to students' specific aptitudes.

This ideal conception, in my view, provides some insights that may help in reconsidering the questions at the core of the debate on excellence in education. First, in response to the question of determining the precise meaning of excellence, the conception advanced specifies that excellence should be conceived in terms of high achievement to be measured in relation to a criterion of quality, which would suggest a shift in focus away from a unique quantitative measurement based on test scores. Second, in response to the question of which abilities and in which educational activities we should promote high achievement, I have defended an expansive and plural conception of excellence to be promoted in a range of intellectual, aesthetics, and physical capacities, with due attention to students' different abilities and due consideration to the value of different pursuits in education. This would suggest a broadening of the range of capacities to be promoted to high levels. Finally, in relation to the question about the reasons for supporting the pursuit of excellence, I have identified its importance for the promotion of well-being.

One fundamental point, however, must be foregrounded: the conception provided is outlined at the ideal level, and, therefore, it is intended as regulative and as probing the limits of possibilities rather than providing concrete direction for enactment. More must be said, therefore, about how to conceptualize educational excellence in the non-ideal circumstances of the real world, in particular in relation to questions of fair provision and the demands of equality of opportunities.

References

- Academies Commission (2013). Unleashing greatness: Getting the best from an academised system. *The Report of the Academies Commission*. RSA/Pearson
- Allen, D. (2016). *Education and equality*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Biesta, G.J.J. (2020). Perfect education, but not for everyone: On society's need for inequality and the rise of surrogate education. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, 1, 8–14.
- Brighouse, H. (2010). Educational equality and school reform. In G. Haydon (Ed.), *Educational equality* (15-70). Continuum.
- Brighouse, H., Ladd, H., Loeb, S., and Swift, A. (2018). *Educational goods. Values, evidence, and decision making*. University of Chicago Press.

- Cooper, D. (1980). *Illusions of equality*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- D'Agnese, V. (2017). *Reclaiming education in the age of PISA. Challenging OECD's educational order*. Routledge.
- DfEE (2007). *Excellence in Schools*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- DfEE (1997). *Excellence for all children: Meeting special educational needs*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- DfEE (1999). *Excellence in cities*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- DfE (2016). *Educational excellence everywhere*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Duru-Bellatt, M. and Mingat, A. (2011) Measuring excellence and equity in education. Conceptual and methodological issues. In Van den Branden, K. Avermaet, P. and Van Houtte, M. (Eds.), *Equity and excellence in education*. (pp. 21-38). Routledge.
- Duke, D. (1985). What is the nature of educational excellence and should we try to measure it? *Phi Delta Kappa International*, 66(10), 671-681.
- Fishkin, J. (2016) *Bottlenecks. A new theory of equal opportunity*. Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, J. (1961). *Can we be equal and excellent too?* Harper & Row.
- Gillies, D. (2007). Excellence and education: Rhetoric and reality. *Education, Knowledge & Economy*, 1(1), 19-35.
- Gillies, D. (2008) Quality and equality: The mask of discursive conflation in education policy texts. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23(6), 685-699
- Guskey, TR. (2013). Defining student achievement. In J. Hattie & Anderman, E.M. (eds.), *International Guide to Student Achievement*. Routledge
- Hurka, T. (1993). *Perfectionism*. Oxford University Press.
- Merry, M.S. (2004) Educational Justice and the Gifted. *Theory and Research in Education*, 6(1), 47-70. ISSN 1477-8785 DOI: 10.1177/1477878507086730
- Nussbaum, (2009). *Education for profit, education for freedom*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ861161.pdf>.
- Nozick, R. (2001). *Anarchy, state and utopia*. Wiley-Blackwell. (Original Work Published 1976).
- OECD, (2012). *PISA 2012 results: Excellence through equity. Giving every student the chance to succeed*. Vol 2. OECD Publishing.
- OECD, (2015). *PISA 2015 results: Excellence and equity in education*. OECD Publishing.
- OECD, (2019). *PISA 2018 Results. What Students Know and Can Do. Vol I*. OECD Publishing
- Oxford Dictionary of Etymology (1966). Oxford University Press.
- Satz, D. (2007). Equality, adequacy, and education for citizenship. *Ethics*, 117(4), 623-648.
- Scanlon, T. M. (2018). *Why does inequality matter?* Oxford University Press.
- Sypnowich, C. (2017). *Equality renewed: Justice, flourishing and the egalitarian ideal*. Routledge.
- Strauss, J. (2020, February 27). Katherine Johnson: Pioneering NASA mathematician. *Space*. <https://www.space.com/katherine-johnson.html>
- Strike, K. A. (1985). Is there a conflict between equity and excellence? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 7(4), pp. 409-416.
- Swift, A. and Stemplowska, S. (2012). Ideal and nonideal theory. In D. Estlund (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of political philosophy* (pp. 373-390). Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, P. (2020). Ofqual and the algorithm. *London Review of Books*, 42(17). <https://www-lrb-co-uk.roe.idm.oclc.org/the-paper/v42/n17/paul-taylor/short-cuts> (Accessed Sept 2020)
- OECD and Pisa tests are damaging education worldwide – academics. (2014, May 6). The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/06/oecd-pisa-tests-damaging-education->

[academics](#)

- Van den Branden, K., Avermaet, P.V., Van Houtte, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Equity and excellence in education: Towards maximum learning opportunities for all students*. Routledge.
- Winstanley, C. (2006). Inequity in equity. Tackling the excellence-equity conundrum. In C. Smith (Ed.), *Including the gifted and talented. Making inclusion work for more gifted and able learners* (pp. 21–39). Routledge.
- Urban, W., Jennings, L., and Wagoner, J. (2014). *American education: A history*. (5th Edition). Routledge.
- U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk*. Washington, U.S. Department of Education.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2020). White House Initiative on Educational excellence for African Americans. *US Department for Education*. <https://sites.ed.gov/whiecaa/>
- U.S. Department for Education. (2015). White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. *US Department for Education*, <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/list/hispanic-initiative/index.html>

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to David Archard and Andy Stables for their support and to two anonymous reviewers for many very helpful suggestions on an earlier version of the paper.

About the Author

Lorella Terzi is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Roehampton, London. She is the author of *Justice and Equality in Education* (2008), which won the 2011 nasen Special Educational Needs Academic Book Award, and the editor of *Special Educational Needs: A New Look* by Mary Warnock and Brahm Norwich (2010). Her publications include numerous articles and book chapters about questions of disability, justice, and the capability approach.