

Chapter 2

The Illusion of Meritocracy and the Audacity of Elitism: Expanding the Evaluative Space in Education

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Abstract In the global context of increasing inequalities between advantaged and disadvantaged social groups, the role of education in achieving social justice has taken on new importance. In this chapter we consider two widely acclaimed books on social inequality, namely: Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2014) and Daniel Dorling's *Injustice: Why Inequality Persists* (2010). We specifically focus on how the authors relate problems of social inequality with educational disadvantage, naming the relation in terms of meritocracy and elitism. We suggest that in the main, Piketty and Dorling hold to distributive accounts of educational disadvantage and to an income/wealth-based evaluation of social inequality. We also argue that the informational basis of Piketty's and Dorling's evaluation excludes an appreciation of social justice as 'recognition' and thus excludes the importance of 'epistemological equity' and of 'agency freedom' in pursuing social justice in educational contexts, particularly in higher education. It is through these two foci on recognitive justice that we augment Piketty's and Dorling's distributive account.

2.1 Introduction

Economic and social inequalities in western nations and across the globe are now the new reality. In 2014, the richest 85 people in the world were as wealthy as the combined wealth of the poorest half of the world's total population (Oxfam 2014a, b). In the USA and Germany, 1% of the population owned 37% and 33%, respectively,

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of their nation's wealth (Vermeulen 2014). While in the UK, the poorest 20% of the population was as wealthy as the nation's richest five families. These are growing disparities, even if at different paces in different nations. For example, in 2003–2004 Australia's wealthiest 20% of the population held 59% of the nation's wealth; by 2011–2012 this had increased to 61% (ABS 2013).

These large and growing disparities in wealth distribution have sparked renewed interest among scholars from a range of fields, and by some politicians and policymakers, in questions of economic, social and educational inequality. Indeed, relations of inequality are an enduring interest among researchers, including those with interests in education (e.g. Connell 1992; Macpherson et al. 2014; Thomson 2002). Since at least the 1970s critical sociologists of education have argued that education systems are responsible for the reproduction of social and economic disadvantage (e.g. see Apple 1979, now into its third edition; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977). From this perspective, educational institutions are seen to reproduce inequality by not recognizing differences in linguistic and cultural competences (i.e. cultural capital) among students (cf. Bourdieu 1986) or at least not equally valuing these differences. The argument proceeds that rather than acknowledging the role that education systems play in re/producing inequality, popular accounts of inequality represent some people—specifically, the dominant in society—as more deserving than others. This is informed either by an *illusion* that their perceived effort and hard work contributes to their privilege (meritocracy), or by the more *audacious* claim that they are inherently more able and superior and thus deserve the advantages already awarded to them (elitism). According to critical scholars, both of these claims represent strategies of the elite, aimed at protecting and enhancing inequality and thus naturalizing the status quo.

In examining these issues of inequality, we take as our focus two popular books recently published on the subject, namely Daniel Dorling's *Injustice: Why social inequalities persist* (2010), and Thomas Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. Both are best sellers and among a growing list of popular books on related matters. Indeed, social and economic inequality has become 'the next big thing' in the social sciences and the focus of much popular debate and research, particularly in Europe and in the USA. So prolific is the field, we could have easily expanded our list to include: *Does the richness of the few benefit us all?* (2013) by Bauman; *The Spirit Level* (2009) by Wilkinson and Pickett; *The Price of Inequality* (2012) by Stiglitz; and *The Cost of Inequality* (2012) by Lansey. However, Dorling's and Piketty's texts are unique in this list because they give a direct and in-depth account of relations between economic and social inequality, even if educational disadvantage receives a relatively minor role in this. The collective work of Piketty and Dorling illustrates how inequality is understood in terms of *access* to education—who gets into what education institutions and how inequality is often justified in terms of meritocracy and elitism.

In the opening sections of this chapter we outline Piketty's overall position on social inequality and the role that meritocracy plays in perpetuating it. We follow this with Dorling's account of economic and social inequality and elitism. Both

authors illustrate how the illusion of meritocracy and the audacity of elitism have significant effects on access to higher education (HE), particularly among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In taking HE as an example, we illustrate and affirm the usefulness of Piketty's and Dorling's complementary accounts for doing education policy analysis. We extend our analysis in the second section of the chapter where we highlight two overlooked ways of thinking beyond issues of unequal access to HE that are implicit in widening participation policies and reinforced by Piketty's and Dorling's analysis. That is, we highlight the deficiencies of a purely access agenda in achieving equity (based on distributive accounts of social justice), arguing for 'epistemological equity' and 'agency freedom' as overlooked dimensions of inequality, which raise questions of *access to what* and *for whose purposes?* In doing so we advocate a broader view of social justice that includes recognitive provisions to tackle cultural injustice in the public sphere, including educational institutions (Fraser 2008). More often than not, distributive accounts of social justice tend to obscure injustices associated with cultural 'mis-recognition' or 'hierarchies of status'. As Fraser argues, "On the view of justice as participatory parity, overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction" (2008, p. 405).

2.2 Meritocracy and Elitism

The idea of meritocracy is generally regarded as a positive and fair approach to distributing resources and attributing achievement and status. It is based on the notion that "individuals get ahead and earn rewards in direct proportion to their individual efforts and abilities" (McNamee and Miller 2009, p. 2). Or more calculatingly, "Intelligence and effort together make up merit ($I + E = M$)" (Young 1965 [1958], p. 94). Meritocracy thus derives its legitimacy from a common sense assumption that rewards are earned through hard work, and those who do not work hard enough deserve lesser rewards. Yet for some, meritocracy is purely a 'myth' (Mills and Gale 2010) and illusory: it has "the veneer of equality while simultaneously *masking the real advantages and disadvantages* that have been differentially distributed across a society" (Lim 2016, p. 161; emphasis added).

In contrast, elitism as a concept does not always garner the same common sense legitimacy. Instead, it evokes a sense of injustice and hostility that a small minority should lay claim to privilege and distinction based solely on who they are. Nevertheless, elitist beliefs persist in many forms that do not always amount to direct claims of special treatment. For example, as Dorling asserts, elitism is given voice through mechanisms and technologies such as IQ tests and standardized student achievement tests (such as PISA). The role of elitist beliefs in maintaining material, social and educational inequality is evident in the very ways in which merit is actualized. It does not simply rely on overt claims of superiority based on existing privilege.

These are the debates and arguments that Piketty and Dorling take up in their respective analyses of social and economic inequality. Piketty's argument is that the illusory nature of merit impedes progress towards equality while hiding behind the rhetoric of egalitarian ideals. For Dorling, elitist beliefs similarly undermine attempts at achieving social justice and play out in measurement technologies that label some people able and most as not. In the following passages we detail Piketty and Dorling's respective positions on these matters, and illustrate how their critiques can be used to explain how meritocracy and elitism contribute to unequal access to higher education.

2.2.1 *Piketty: The Illusion of Meritocracy*

French economist Thomas Piketty argues in *Capital in the Twenty-first Century* (2014) that inequalities in wealth accumulation and income distribution in advanced economies have increased in the last two centuries. In fact, from the early 1980s, with the ascendancy of a neoliberal political economy, the gap has widened substantially. For Piketty, meritocracy plays a key role in creating and maintaining this gap. The historic emergence of democratic societies has led to the view that achievement and advantage ought to be the result of one's own abilities and effort rather than derived from kinship, royalty or inheritance. On face value, this "meritocratic hope", as Piketty puts it (2014, p. 361), seems fairer and more just than previous epochs, which awarded status and advantage on the basis of birth-right. The apparent fairness of meritocracy is in the perception that it designates "certain individuals as 'winners' and to reward them all the more generously if they seem to have been selected on the *basis of their intrinsic merits rather than birth or background*" (Piketty 2014, p. 334; emphasis added). In this sense, the emergence of meritocracy can be seen to emanate from the historical decline of hierarchical societies and the shift from honour to dignity and universal recognition as a basis for distributing social goods (Taylor 1994).

Yet, while meritocracy seems to herald a more democratic, egalitarian society in which individuals can achieve social mobility through ability and effort, it also functions as a justification for social inequalities. Piketty writes that meritocracy plays:

a very crucial role in modern society, for a simple reason: in a democracy, the professed equality of rights of all citizens contrasts sharply with the very real inequality of living conditions, and in order to overcome this contradiction it is vital to make sure that social inequalities derive from rational and universal principles rather than arbitrary contingencies. Inequalities must therefore be just and useful to all, at least in the realm of discourse and as far as possible in reality as well. (2014, p. 361)

In other words, the very discourse that buoys meritocracy as a more just way of distributing social goods also legitimizes disadvantage. For if material wealth, increased social standing and achievement are the product of one's abilities and

effort, then those who are poor and marginalized must be so because of a lack of these. Inequality is thus rationalized. Piketty's main concern is that meritocracy is being used as a disguise for socio-economic privileges, including access to quality education. That is, long-standing inequalities and the growing distance between the rich and the poor are 'misrecognised' (cf. Bourdieu 1984) as the result of merit being earned rather than the outcome of inherent unequal social arrangements. The meritocratic argument seems to justify social inequality (originating from human capital inequality) as a function of the supply and demand of skills, mediated by the education system and the labour market.

The myth of meritocracy is evident in what Piketty refers to as "hypermeritocratic society" (p. 265) or the "new meritocratic order" (p. 378) whereby perceived merit and apparent productivity are used to disguise the privilege of dominant social groups, exemplified in high salaries and bonuses being paid for senior managers. Piketty writes that "the most ardent meritocratic beliefs are often invoked to justify very large wage inequalities, which are said to be more justified than inequalities due to inheritance" (2014, p. 356). In other words, meritocratic discourse is employed primarily to justify the 'position of the winners' in society.

Whereas educational spending still "amplifies inequalities of social origin", unequal access to HE is justified on the basis of merit (Piketty 2014, p. 418). Piketty illustrates how the illusion of meritocracy has affected access to HE, arguing that it is mediated more by socio-economic background than by merit. For example, in many OECD nations students from privileged social backgrounds are disproportionately represented in prestigious schools and colleges. In countries such as the U. S., "parents' income has become an almost perfect predictor of university access" (p. 416). In the U.S., with an average income of around \$US450,000 in 2014, parents of Harvard University students correspond to the top 2% of the USA income hierarchy. In France, the average income of parents of Sciences Po students in 2014 is around €90,000, which corresponds to the top 10% of the French income hierarchy (Piketty 2014). Students from underprivileged social backgrounds could not afford the high cost of tuition in elite educational institutions. Piketty's argument is that if selection was based on merit, as is held in official meritocratic discourses, the distribution of students in the income hierarchy would be much broader.

This trend in turn results in a hierarchy of qualifications that eventually reinforces the social hierarchy. As a result, the social mobility that might be thought to come as a result of meritocracy is not evident. More equal access to HE based on ability rather than existing social position should lead to a more even distribution of income and accumulated wealth. However, in Piketty's account this has not historically been the case in OECD economies. He concludes that "there is no evidence that education has really increased intergenerational mobility" (2014, pp. 288–289). Rather, it might have decreased:

the intergenerational correlation of education and earned incomes, which measures the reproduction of the skill hierarchy over time, shows no trend toward greater mobility over the long run, and in recent years mobility may even have decreased. (Piketty 2014, p. 484)

In effect, the meritocratic system is underpinned by a self-fulfilling prophecy. Piketty stresses: “defining the meaning of inequality and justifying the position of the winners is a matter of vital importance [in meritocratic claims], and one can expect to see all sorts of misrepresentations of the facts in service of the cause” (2014, p. 487).

2.2.2 Dorling: *The Audacity of Elitism*

Like Piketty, human geographer Daniel Dorling’s research focuses on the growing economic inequality of the world. Of his books in this field (e.g. 2010, 2014), only one (*Injustice*) includes a focus on education—albeit largely confined to one chapter. In that chapter Dorling addresses the belief that *elitism is efficient*, which he suggests is one of the five main beliefs that uphold inequality.¹ Although he does not explicitly elaborate on this, Dorling does argue that long-standing views among the elite function to perpetuate social inequalities in general and in educational inequalities in particular. Elitism is assumed to be efficient because, as Bauman (2013, p. 22) summarizes, “the good of the many can be enhanced only by promoting abilities which relatively few, by definition, solely possess”. Unlike arguments in favour of meritocracy, which are premised on a seemingly plausible rationale, elitism rests on a more *audacious* assertion that the advantage of a minority is a result of their inherent superior intelligence.² “Elitism in education”, Bauman notes, “can be considered a new injustice” (p. 34).

Dorling’s central argument is that elitism is alive and well in modern western societies, such as those of the UK, the US and Australia. He maintains that although there were significant inroads made in the fight against inequality in the wake of World War II, since the 1970s governments have eroded these advances, often systematically and deliberately. That this coincided with the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganomics is not lost on Dorling. In Dorling’s account, the economic uncertainty of the early 1970s combined with increasing equality in advanced societies—through, *inter alia*, improved access to education, the protection afforded by the welfare state, greater income equality, and civil rights—left the socially privileged feeling vulnerable and insecure:

the early 1970 s were a disconcerting time if you were affluent. Inflation was high; if you were well off enough to have savings then those savings were being eroded. People began to realise that their children were not going to be as cushioned as they were by so much relative wealth, by going to different schools. When politicians said that they were going to eradicate the evil of ignorance by educating all children in Britain, or that they were going

¹The other four beliefs are: (1) exclusion is necessary, (2) prejudice is natural, (3) greed is good and (4) despair is inevitable (Dorling 2010).

²See Gillborn (2016) and Gulson and Webb (this volume) for an outline and critique of the use and misuse of biological and other sciences to justify inequality on the basis of assumed genetic intelligence.

to have a ‘Great Society’ in the US, they did not mention that this would reduce the apparent advantages of some children. Equal rights for black children, a level playing field for poor children—these can be seen as threats as more compete in a race where proportionately fewer and fewer can win. (Dorling 2010, p. 61)

Thus the (re)emergence of elitism is arguably a strategy of the privileged to preserve their privilege in response to increased education for social groups who had previously been largely uneducated. Left unchecked, education has the potential to ‘rob’ the elite of their ‘rights’ or, more accurately, what they regard as their rightful position in society, and thus needs to be ‘managed’.

Dorling argues that these elitist beliefs are evident in the OECD’s national testing regime PISA (an assessment of school students’ performance and achievement, comparable across nations). The research literature critiquing the rise of such testing is voluminous and growing (e.g. Goldstein 2004; Gorur 2011, 2015; Grek 2009; Sellar and Lingard 2013; Serder and Ideland 2016). However, Dorling’s critique is a fairly simple one: standardized test results—and IQ tests before them—are surreptitiously normalized to fit a bell curve in which only a small proportion of students can be categorised as high achievers:

when calibrating the results (adjusting the scores before release), [the OECD] ‘... assumed that students have been sampled from a multivariate normal distribution’. Given this assumption, almost no matter how the students had ‘performed’, the curves in [the data] would have been bell shaped. The data were made to fit the curve. (2010, p. 47)

The result is that only 2% of students are classified as having ‘advanced’ knowledge and skills; with 11% described as having ‘developed’ ability, 26% ‘effective’, 27% ‘simple’, 21% with ‘barely’ any ability, 11% ‘limited’ and 2% with ‘none’. In Dorling’s account this distribution of skills and abilities does not reflect the realities of children, their families, schools or communities. Rather it is a *perception* of ability constructed by international testing regimes that use these rankings to “propagate elitist beliefs” (Dorling 2010, p. 40).

Clearly, in this scheme only a small proportion of young people are able to achieve scores sufficient to progress to higher education, with the rest variously categorized as ‘failures’. According to Dorling, the high achievers are lauded as being the best and the brightest and awarded the spoils of high status, including the distinction of having a university education. He notes that “[u]nder elitism education is less about learning and *more about dividing people*, sorting out the supposed wheat from the chaff and conferring high status upon a minority” (2010, p. 35; emphasis added). In advanced economies, this has resulted in what Dorling refers to as “educational apartheid” (p. 26) in which “particular groups are increasingly seen as ‘not fit’ for advanced education, as being limited in their abilities, as requiring less of an education than the supposedly more gifted and talented” (Dorling 2010, p. 33). Yet these testing regimes are arguably inherently biased towards some—those who come from a background similar to those who devise the tests (i.e. in Bourdieu’s terms, they have high quantities of the dominant cultural capital), and those who are coached in doing well in them. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with cultural capital that differs from the

dominant are less able to achieve in these tests and are ultimately labelled as less capable or even incapable and sometimes unworthy of further education (including HE). Belief in the inherent superiority of some is woven into the structures of education, which shapes who is regarded as able or qualified to go onto further study. It functions as a gatekeeper for higher education: “Increased elitism might tolerate raising the school leaving age to 18, but it is not commensurate with providing more education for all after that” (Dorling 2010, p. 57).

2.3 Widening the Evaluative Space of Inequality

In their analyses both Dorling (2010) and Piketty (2014) show the extent of stratification in access to education and its implication for persistence of social inequality. A significant proportion of people from disadvantaged backgrounds receive only the minimum amount of education required by law, while those who go on to higher education tend to attend lower status institutions and receive educational qualifications that have lower economic returns. Those from more elite backgrounds are more likely to attend university in the first place and are enrolled at elite institutions and in high-earning disciplines that maintain and advance their positional advantage (Marginson 2006). That is, the authors’ primary focus is on elitism and unequal *access* to education (Dorling) and the ideology of meritocracy and differential wage *income* after graduation (Piketty). However, we argue that this explanation of inequalities is too narrow and should be widened to address two questions in relation to HE, namely: *access to what* and *for whose purposes*? The first question speaks to issues of epistemological equity; the second to agency freedom: what students are able to do and to be in terms of what courses they may choose and what lives they may pursue in the future. We expand on each of these in turn by drawing on recent debates in the field from Dei (2008). Connell (2007) and Sen (2009) among others. Our responses to these questions also propose repurposing both the content and social function of higher education in ways that erode the structural basis of elitist and meritocratic forces that reproduce inequality. Our responses also entail a move towards recognitive forms of social justice that seek to realign the terms of recognition of marginalized groups (Fraser 1995; Gale and Densmore 2000; Taylor 1994).

2.3.1 *Epistemological Equity: Access to What?*

We take our inspiration here from two main sources: (1) scholarship into the importance of including and embedding Indigenous knowledges in education curriculum (e.g. Dei 2008, 2010; Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Ocholla 2007; Seth 2007); and (2) Connell’s (2006, 2007) argument for a ‘southern theory’ that eschews the dominant voices in social theory (e.g. Bourdieu and Giddens) on the

grounds that they are remnants of a colonial past and no longer relevant, and for replacing them with indigenously derived theory that is more germane to contexts. Both of these bodies of literature draw attention—either directly or indirectly—to the exclusionary nature of knowledge and ways of knowing embedded in higher education curriculum and pedagogy. Both illustrate that Eurocentric knowledge dominates the academy and valorises traditional disciplinary knowledge and techniques of knowledge production (mostly notably ‘scientific’ methods and knowledges). Excluded from the curricular and the pedagogic practices of many HE institutions in the ‘global north’ are indigenous knowledges, as well as those from other marginalized and minority groups such as women and working class groups (Connell 2006; Gale 2013).

Scholars such as Connell and Dei argue for counterhegemonic stances that problematize existing hierarchies of knowledge and knowledge production. They question the forms of knowledges that are valued and devalued in education, and highlight how curriculum and pedagogy might be transformed to encompass the diverse experiences and knowledges of marginalized populations (Dei 2008). Connell calls attention to the “centre–periphery relations in the realm of knowledge” (2008, p. viii) and argues for a ‘southern’ theory that disrupts the hegemony of the ‘metropole’ of knowledge in the global north. ‘Northern’ and ‘southern’ are used by Connell:

... not to name a sharply bounded category of states or societies, but to emphasise relations—authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship, appropriation—between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery. (Connell 2007, pp. viii–ix)

Epistemological equity amounts to a southern theory of higher education (Gale 2013), which involves the inclusion of ‘southern’ or marginalized perspectives, theories, knowledges and epistemologies into the very heart of education systems, not as a simple add-on that leaves dominant, elite knowledge structures intact.

The development of a southern theory of student equity in higher education remains a relatively new horizon of social justice. It responds to potential criticisms—aligned with elitist beliefs about who should go to HE—that equity is anathema to excellence in at least two respects. First, on *educational* grounds, there is evidence to suggest that a more diverse student body has benefits for all, including for “majority students who have previously lacked significant direct exposure to minorities” (Milem 2003, pp. 131–132). Diversity within the student population also leads to “greater relative gains in critical and active thinking ... greater intellectual engagement and academic motivation ... [and] greater relative gains in intellectual and social self-concept” (Milem 2003, p. 142) for all students. Thus Milem makes the more general claim that creating space for and valuing “diversity in colleges and universities is not only a matter of social justice but also a matter of *promoting educational excellence*” (Milem 2003, p. 126; emphasis added).

This leads to our second point about the *epistemological* contribution of equity to excellence: that higher education currently excludes certain forms of knowledge

and ways of knowing—including those from Indigenous people and from ‘working class’ backgrounds—and thus is inherently partial and distorted (cf. Harding 1992). To valorise existing disciplinary knowledge at the expense of less ‘scientific’ or more ‘subjective’ ways of knowing from beyond the periphery of knowledge production is to provide a diminished higher education. For example, inclusion of under-represented cultural groups needs to be complemented with the recognition of their knowledge and ways of knowing. In much the same way that scholars argue for the connection between school students’ lifeworlds and their classrooms through a funds of knowledge approach (e.g. Moll et al. 1992; Zipin 2009), we argue for a transformation of HE curriculum that encompasses these ‘peripheral’ knowledges and of the pedagogies through which they are encountered.

Third, epistemological equity is necessarily a *political* project in that it ‘speaks truth to power’. The inclusion in HE curriculum and pedagogy of previously discounted knowledges disrupts dominant power relations that dictate what counts as valid knowledge in society. It is also part of changing the terms of recognition of the disadvantaged in society by the privileged and elite (Appadurai 2004; Gale and Parker 2015; Taylor 1994), lending wider legitimacy to the values, worldviews and ways of knowing of marginalized communities. In other words, epistemological equity entails a reconfiguration of “the conditions within which the norms that frame our social lives are negotiated” (Gale and Parker 2015, p. 92) and has the potential to upset the foundations of advantage and privilege.³

Epistemological equity, then, moves the focus of educational inequity beyond access (who gets in) to a more inclusive education in terms of what students have access to (access to what) and towards wider concerns of recognition and social justice.

2.3.2 *Agency Freedom: Access for Whose Purposes?*

Our second augmentation to Dorling and Piketty’s focus on access to education and on its use value, is derived from the question: what can people do and be with their education. As noted in Dorling’s (2010) and Piketty’s (2014) account of persisting inequalities, meritocratic discourses and elitist assumptions underpin unequal access to education and stagnant social mobility in many OECD economies. It is also evident that the instrumentalist view of education values knowledge and skills primarily for national *economic productivity*, and improved *economic return* to the individual.

³Taylor (1994, p. 26) goes further to argue that recognition is a “vital human need”, while Appadurai (2004, p. 62) urges that it is an “ethical obligation to extend a sort of moral cognizance to persons who shared worldviews deeply different from our own”. These are sentiments we would agree with, although they perhaps take us away from the main argument at hand.

However, beyond inequalities in access and income, the link between educational disadvantage and social inequality can be expressed in the form of unequal capacity to exercise one's agency. Here we draw on the work of Amartya Sen (1992, 1999, 2009) to suggest that education—particularly higher education—needs to be reoriented to encompass the substantive freedoms, or real opportunities, that students have to pursue lives they have reason to value. For Sen, capabilities are “a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being” and represent the “alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be” (Sen 1993, p. 30). The capabilities approach places the emphasis on the freedoms to choose rather than the particular choices themselves. Hence, in assessing whether or not unequal access to education contributes to social inequality, the focus should be on how *capabilities* can be enacted both *for* and *through* education (Gale and Molla 2015). In other words, a capabilities approach to equity in (higher) education shifts the focus away from issues of equality in access and participation towards the freedoms and opportunities that people are able to enjoy in terms of (a) choosing to select an education that they have reason to value (agency *for* education), and (b) the kinds of lives they are able to pursue once they have obtained a qualification (agency *through* education) (Gale and Molla 2015).

Agency for education means putting students at the centre of the pedagogic process, as is envisaged in the tradition of critical pedagogy. Fostering the agency freedom of students necessitates a learning process that encourages students to problematize taken for granted assumptions underpinning curricular representations, teachers' work and students' experiences; and enables them to take and defend positions on issues that matter most in their societies (Giroux 1992). As Paulo Freire (2000) argued, consciousness raising involves “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). The learning experiences are designed and enacted in a way that students become self-conscious about their values and assumptions and what effects these might have in society. Widening access to education can be seen as a way of granting ‘freedom from’ constraints, but only ‘freedom to’ do and be as one wishes confers genuine opportunity, which is critical “because it relates to individual interpretations of what is possible, salient and relevant” (Talbot 1993 p. 83).

Agency through education highlights the role of education in building active and informed citizens. Beyond instrumental purposes of education construed by the state, a freedom-based assessment of equity in education emphasizes real opportunities people have to be able to convert the resources they have into achievements they value. It is concerned with enabling people to live a life they regard as worth living. Seen from a capability approach, social inequality is not merely lack of income or access to opportunities but it is *deprivation of agency freedom*. That is, in judging a person's advantage, one needs to focus on equality as measured by what the individual is able to be and do (Sen 2009) rather than the amount of resources he/she possesses (as resources are only means for a valuable life). Nonetheless, the prevailing logic of the neoliberal imaginary (Rizvi and Lingard 2010) envisages the modern knowledge worker as a compliant subject contributing to the goals and

aspirations of a government competing in the global economy.⁴ In contrast, a freedom-based assessment of educational opportunities underscores people's ability to choose what they do with their lives rather than have them pre-decided and prescribed by government. It emphasizes the ability of people to exercise their rights to make choices and the power to act in light of their choices (Gale and Molla 2015). In the context of the emerging 'hypermeritocratic society' (Piketty 2014), agency freedom as an educational goal is a necessity, not an option. Without informed citizens who can effectively engage in public debate, critically assess their situation and act to change it, the flourishing of democratic political values remains at risk.

A capabilities approach to understanding inequity in education also expands how in/equality is understood. For Dorling and Piketty (as well as in contemporary political thought generally) the effects of educational inequality are narrowly measured in economic terms. However, educational disadvantage does not just diminish people's material resources. More importantly, it inhibits their agency to pursue valuable doings and beings. A capability-based evaluation of educational disadvantage is instrumental in problematizing how people's freedom to be well educated is constrained or denied as a member of particular social groups defined by socio-economic status, gender, rurality, or cultural background. Educational injustice is thus a form of deprivation of *substantive freedom* that constitutes people's well-being and potential to flourish. In this sense, a capability-based approach draws attention to social in/justices by emphasizing human agency and freedom over human capital and economic outcomes. Framing the lack of agency freedom as a key aspect of social inequality deepens our understanding of the relationship between educational disadvantage and the reproduction of social inequality. The focus is on how educational disadvantage might diminish people's capabilities to live flourishing lives they have reason to value.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that meritocracy and elitism are key in reproducing inequality in education and in particular in restricting access to higher education. Piketty's account is that the hope in meritocracy to solve inequalities in education is misplaced; it is an illusion, a cover for the elite. Similarly, Dorling shows that inequalities in education are also perpetuated by the audacity of the elite: the naked belief (and associated practices) that it is their natural right to public resources that

⁴For example, the previous Australian Labor Government's (2007–2013) now defunct white paper, *Australia in Asian Century*, which specified the skills and 'capabilities' (in the broader, more literal sense of the term) required for "all Australians [to] raise our productivity performance and enable all Australians to participate and contribute in the Asian century" (Australian Government 2012, p. 161; see also Gale and Molla, 2015).

secure their elite positions. Both highlight the extent of the inequalities in OECD nations derived from such meritocracy and elitism.

However, current framings of relations between education disadvantage and rising social inequality—such as those illustrated by Piketty and Dorling—do not offer a full account of their interaction. For example, the focus on *access* to HE leaves untroubled questions of what it is that people are accessing—in terms of curriculum and pedagogy—and the purposes to which education is put. We have argued that a better understanding of the relations between education and social inequality requires a broadening of what we understand by equality and equity. Rather than focusing exclusively on rates of access to HE, we argue for the need to consider what kind of HE students access, in terms that go beyond debates about ‘quality’ or ‘excellence’.

A more equitable higher education is one that incorporates a range of otherwise excluded epistemologies, knowledges, ways of knowing into the curriculum and pedagogy of HE practice. A more equitable higher education also involves reimagining what purpose it can serve in contemporary times. Rather than merely educating people to feed the needs of the knowledge economy and to enhance a nation’s competitive global edge, as meritocratic discourse and elitist assumptions suggest, HE can and should also function to enhance people’s substantive freedom, or capabilities. Without this expanded appreciation for the nature of social justice, even resolving the problems of access to and instrumental value of education that Dorling and Piketty identify will not in themselves deliver a socially just education.

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