
Democracy & Education

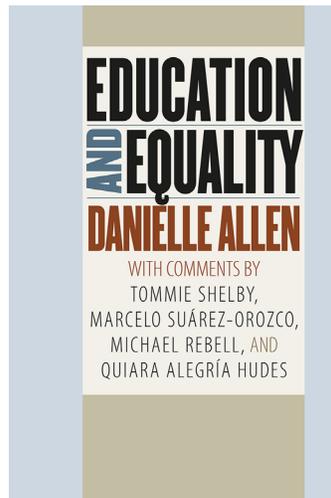
Improving Equality through Study in the Humanities

A Book Review of *Education and Equality*

Jane Blanken-Webb (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

DANIELLE ALLEN'S RECENT book, *Education and Equality* (2016), forwards a much-needed perspective for considering the relationship between education and equality in an era in which the value of education seems to be almost unquestionably commensurate with the economic payback it produces in terms of future job earnings. Rather than thinking of education only as a proxy for the transmission of technical know-how and skill that can lead to higher-paying jobs and ultimately improve conditions of economic inequality in our society, Allen takes up the intrinsic relationship between education and equality in which the practice of human development, in itself, contributes to "a citizenry ready to participate maximally in our shared project of self-governance" (Allen, 2016, p. 116). Drawing on the philosophies of John Rawls, Hannah Arendt, and ultimately pragmatism, Allen details an account of what she terms the humanistic baseline of education to clear the way for understanding what education is and how it, in itself, contributes to equality.

Before getting to the details of her argument, it is worth taking note of the unique structure of the book. In the first two chapters, Allen (2016) lays out a detailed philosophical analysis from her 2014 Tanner Lectures at Stanford University, which is followed by commentary from four leaders in the field: Tommie Shelby, Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Michael Rebell, and Quiara Alegría Hudes. In conclusion, Allen responds to her commentators, clarifying and further elaborating her position before offering some final words of consideration about the relationship between



education and equality. This built-in peer review structure allows for multiple lenses of discussion, critique, and expansion that pushes Allen's argument further, ultimately enabling her to clarify and drive home her position about the role and significance of an education grounded in the humanities within a democratic society.

Allen's (2016) first step involves conceptual "cleanup work." Drawing on Rawls and Arendt in an attempt to establish clarity for thinking about what education is and on what grounds it can be justified, Allen lays the groundwork for what she terms the humanistic baseline for education. From Rawls, Allen borrows the idea of "two concepts of education," arguing that we need to think of education from the system level as well as the micro level. At the system level, education can reasonably be justified by social utility, or, as we find so prevalent today, for the sake of economic competitiveness. However, Allen claims such consequentialist justifications do not hold up when considering education at the micro level involving individual instances of teaching. These, she maintains, must be justified based on eudaimonistic goals of individual development. If a so-called educational practice cannot be justified from the standpoint of specific instances of educating within that practice, Allen concludes it does

JANE BLANKEN-WEBB is a Postdoctoral Research Associate with the Information Trust Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

not “count” as education. While there is some moral force behind the idea that we should consider whether individual instances of educating are justified alongside considerations of a broader system-level view of a given practice, it is not entirely convincing that this dual layer of justification is needed in order for a given practice to “count” as education. Who is doing the counting and for what purpose? The answers to these questions are not entirely clear within Allen’s account; however, her overall point that education should develop individuals with a range of cognitive, affective, and intersubjective capacities to support overall human flourishing is one that I—and I believe many readers—will happily uphold.

This establishes what Allen (2016) refers to as the humanistic baseline for education, where no matter the broader social goals, education must also develop individuals’ latent potential for general human flourishing. To give content to this conception of the humanistic baseline for education, Allen turns to Arendt’s philosophy, which affords her a way to bring “social and individual goods into alignment with one another on democratic footing” (Allen, 2016, p. 18). I find it interesting given her later turn to pragmatist philosophy that she does not turn directly to Dewey’s (1916) *Democracy and Education* to make this point; however, her Arendtian analysis is well taken and gives greater precision for thinking about individual human well-being. Extrapolating from Arendt’s three core human activities (labor, work, and action), Allen proposes four basic potentialities that education should cultivate. She proposes that education should prepare individuals for (a) breadwinning, (b) civic and political engagement, (c) creative self-expression and world making, and (d) rewarding relationships in spaces of intimacy and leisure. Taken together, these four potentialities address both the systems-level and the micro-level perspectives on education and, perhaps even more significantly, offer a framework for analysis that can guide educational policy.

In chapter two, Allen (2016) shifts her focus, arguing that we need to cultivate these four areas of human potential to establish “participatory readiness.” In doing so, she prioritizes participation in civic and political life because she finds this type of participation to be central for mitigating our intertwining problems of political and economic inequality. This prioritization of political and civic readiness may, indeed, form a more direct link to concerns of political and economic inequality than, say, participatory readiness in intimacy and social relations. However, I believe that Allen’s prioritization of political and civic readiness leaves open space to further develop and deepen her overarching argument pertaining to the link between humanities-based education and the realization of greater political and economic equality. In short, I am suggesting the possibility that our capacities for political and civic readiness may derive from our readiness for intimacy and social relations and that the development and refinement of our language capacities, which are so central to Allen’s overall argument in support of the humanities, is at the core of the development of both political and civic readiness and readiness for intimacy and social relations. Accordingly, Allen’s basic framework for linking humanities-based education could well be extended further, beyond participatory readiness for civic

and political life alone, to promote conditions of greater equality within a democratic society.

In short, Allen’s (2016) argument is that if we get education right, it will cause “participation because [education] makes people ready to participate” (p. 31). And in a democratic society, being ready for political participation allows for the possibility of contesting “labor market rules that deliver insupportable forms of income inequality” (p. 31). So, in addition to developing skills to support the labor market, we also need to create the possibility of change in social norms that can lead to greater political as well as economic equality. The humanities are central to accomplishing this because they involve serious engagement with language and promote verbal empowerment that, Allen offers, is at the base of political empowerment. For this reason, Allen suggests that the “humanistic components of the curriculum do a distinctive kind of work in support of participatory readiness and that this work does not directly correlate with the socioeconomic status effects of education on participation” (p. 48). In this way, humanities-based education, in itself, contributes to greater equality.

There is much to admire about Allen’s (2016) analysis, which offers serious and detailed engagement with the connection between education and equality. With the help of her commentators, this book pushes the conversation even further through challenging critique, reflection on the role of philosophers in educational debates, consideration of legal issues related to participatory readiness, and elaboration on the power and profundity of language—on this last point, I recommend reading Hudes’s essay at least twice. In her response, Allen distinguishes her account from Platonic metaphysics or neo-Aristotelianism by turning to philosophical pragmatism. Given her earlier reliance on Rawls and Arendt—both of whom are not typically seen as pragmatists—I found this a bit surprising; nonetheless, I think this works for grounding her argument and vantage point. The turn to pragmatism certainly underscores her commitment to democracy and the significance of developing the latent powers of everyday citizens to take part in shaping our pluralistic world.

Engaging with this book has pushed me to think hard about the relationship between education and equality. Allen’s (2016) *Education and Equality* opens up new conversations that stand to shift policy discussions in new much-needed directions.

References

- Allen, D. (2016). *Education and equality*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York, NY: Free Press.