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PROBLEMS OF EQUITY IN DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACHES

Robert E. Floden and Sharon Feiman

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Although interpretations of the term "development" vary widely, those who use it think of change in terms of a sequence of stages that culminates in a mature end state. They also assume that developmental change is self-directed rather than imposed from the outside.

The consequences of educators' interest in developmentally-based approaches are diverse and difficult to trace. This paper focuses on consequences in one area--equity in education. We argue that adopting developmental approaches could reinforce or aggravate certain inequities in schools. While this is not an inevitable consequence, avoiding it requires special effort.

We begin by examining three common interpretations of equity in education. Next, we describe three developmental practices that might be inequitable because they could violate one or more of these interpretations. Finally, we show how approaches to teacher education that consider themselves developmental may perpetuate these same inequities through similar practices.

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Interpretations of Equity

As an educational goal, equity is universally esteemed and variously interpreted. Particularly since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, scholars in education have tried to describe some of the interpretations of equity and sort out the consequences of taking one over another. The three interpretations below are among the most common:

1. Equity in education exists when differences in school achievement are independent of race, ethnicity, and sex.
2. Equity in education exists when decisions about the educational programs of individual students are independent of race, ethnicity, and sex.
3. Equity in education exists when differences in cultural norms are reflected in school practices.

The first interpretation is most prominent in the policies of the National Institute of Education (NIE). Representatives of the NIE have defined equity as the absence of differences in mean achievement scores in reading and mathematics among different sexual, racial, cultural, and ethnic groups (Graham, Note 1; Koehler, 1979). School achievement as measured by standardized tests is considered important because of its presumed effect on access to high income and status occupations.

The second interpretation is implicit in recent lawsuits charging that many students are placed in special education classes because of their race or ethnicity, rather than their mental or physical abilities. In a prominent California court case (Larry P. v. Riles, 1979) cultural bias in IQ tests is blamed for the overly high proportion of minority students assigned to classes for the educably mentally retarded. This interpretation of equity would also militate against discouraging female students from working in math or science independent of their abilities and interests. The concern is that no student should be restricted in their curricular opportunities on the basis of race, ethnicity, or sex.

The third interpretation is directed at the imposition of middle-class values on other social groups. Standard examples include trying to foster competition among students whose culture favors cooperation and trying to inculcate a belief in institutions that maintain the dominance of one class or culture.

These interpretations of equity are not merely three different ways of expressing the same idea. A situation might be equitable under one interpretation, but not under another. For example, imagine an elementary school mathematics program in which every child progressed through the same lessons by interacting with a computer terminal. The program might be considered equitable because it ignored race, ethnicity, and sex in making decisions about instruction (Interpretation 2), yet be considered inequitable if female students finished with lower achievement (Interpretation 1). In considering the dangers of developmental approaches, we show a connection to one interpretation, but recognize that problems of equity might not arise if a different interpretation were taken.

Dangers of Developmental Practices

The wide range of educational practices consistent with any developmental theory makes it impossible to specify the implications for equity of a developmental approach to education. Some developmental educators may foster equity in education, while others may create problems. In neither case can credit or blame be assigned directly to the developmental approach. But the adoption of a

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Dangers of Developmental Practices

The wide range of educational practices consistent with any developmental theory makes it impossible to specify the implications for equity of a developmental approach to education. Some developmental educators may foster equity in education, while others may create problems. In neither case can credit or blame be assigned directly to the developmental approach. But the adoption of a developmental approach may increase the likelihood of teaching in ways that create inequities, quite likely without the teacher's awareness of the difficulties.

We discuss three developmental practices that embody this dangerous inclination. The first is the tendency to adopt the end state of a developmental theory as an educational goal, thereby imposing a restrictive model of appropriate learning on diverse students. The second is a too literal commitment to "readiness" as a basis for deciding when to teach what, denying some students the opportunity to learn topics taught to others. The third is an over-emphasis on student choice with the consequent abnegation of teacher responsibility for student learning. Each of these practices risks violating one or more of the previously discussed interpretations of equity.

Imposing a Restrictive Model of Learning

Most educational historians now see the "melting pot" view of American education differently than they did 20 years ago. At that time, schools were supposed to perform the positive function of transforming children from a variety of backgrounds into Americans. Schools not only taught children how to read and write, but also how to behave as upright citizens. Though the hope that schools will build citizenship and provide moral training has not vanished, the definition of good citizenship and moral behavior has become problematic. What was once clearly seen as contributing to these goals is now often described as the imposition of dominant cultural values on all other groups. For example, the encouragement of competition among students may fit well with the values of a white, middle-class Protestant ethic, but may conflict with Hispanic subgroups who stress cooperation. Some view instruction in standard English as a legitimate attempt to prepare children for success in American society; others see it as an effort to impose the language of the dominant class on groups who speak a different dialect in the home. Is music instruction that emphasizes Bach or Mozart an initiation into our cultural heritage or an implicit slight on the art of blacks? Why doesn't Ellington get as much attention as Ives? There is an inevitable tension between the goal of increasing a student's chance for success in a society that is dominated by the white middle class and the goal of maintaining the cultural heritage of minority groups.

A developmentally based program faces the danger of importing a position on this issue by adopting as its goal the end state of the underlying theory. The characterization of maturity may be accepted as scientifically derived when it actually reflects only the values of the dominant culture. Educators who think they are bowing to scientific authority may inadvertently make a political decision.

The end state or definition of maturity that forms part of a developmental theory rests more on choices made by the theorist than on the empirical study of change. Decisions about what changes will be included in the theory and how those changes will be described depends on an initial decision about what counts as maturity. While empirical evidence places pragmatic constraints on the theorist's choice, it does not dictate what maturity is (Floden & Feiman, Note 2). A theorist may base a description of maturity on things he or she values. If the theorist is a member of the dominant culture, those values are likely to be consistent with broader patterns of cultural values. Hence, the portrayal of maturity may be a description of values of the dominant culture. In other words, what students should become is not derived from an empirically-based description of what many students do become, even though developmental educators often make that assumption.

Trying to move all students to higher developmental stages may violate a definition of equity that advocates adjusting the goals of education to correspond to differences in cultural values (Interpretation 3). Imposition of one set of educational goals is inequitable if students differ in the values their subculture would consider most appropriate.

The application of Kohlberg's theory of moral development embodies this danger (Kohlberg, 1969; Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972). Kohlberg describes the stages through which he claims all individuals progress in their ways of thinking about moral questions. The theory focuses on the types of reasons brought to bear on an issue, rather than on the particular reasons themselves. At a lower stage, people think about possible actions in terms of the likelihood of being rewarded or punished by some powerful individual. At a middle stage, actions are considered in terms of their correspondence to prevailing views about what is right or wrong. At the highest stage, the individual bases a decision on an abstract ethical principle arrived at through consideration of its universality and impartiality.

Kohlberg himself is guilty of claiming that his highest stage represents a scientifically established desirable end of education (1971, 1973). This encourages teachers to think that Kohlberg's empirical studies, which show a regularity in the pattern of change in moral reasoning, justify adopting the highest stage as _the_ goal for moral education for all students.

Obviously, this is inappropriate. Kohlberg has selected a characterization of moral maturity that is rooted in a particular ethical tradition. He tends to write as though anyone with sufficient background would agree that this is the only valid ethical theory and does little to defend this implicit position despite the charge that he has over-simplified the field of ethics (Peters, 1971, 1975; Schrag, 1973; Oldenquist, 1979). Philosophers of the stature of Aristotle have taken a very different view of the best form of moral reasoning. Modern ethical theorists are far from unanimous about the definition of moral maturity.

Adopting Kohlberg's theory as a model for moral education poses particular problems with regard to equity. Gilligan (1977), for example, has argued that Kohlberg emphasizes characteristics that men display more often than women and neglects moral virtues that women tend to possess. Thus, the theory portrays women as morally deficient. An educator who adopted Kohlberg's theory might see female students as morally backward in comparison to male students. Furthermore, educational attempts to mold female students into the model of the mature male may inhibit the acquisition of virtues (female) that would be easily obtained, while failing to achieve the production of moral maturity as defined by Kohlberg's model. This parallels the problem of imposing dominant cultural norms by denying the worth of alternative positions. The minority group member is viewed as a failure by the standards of the dominant culture and the worthwhileness of characteristics of the minority culture (or gender) is denied.

Overemphasis on "Readiness"

The second danger is implied in the title of a recent essay by Duckworth (1979), "Either we're too early and they can't learn it or we're too late and they know it already: The dilemma 'applying

Piaget'." The developmental assumption that everyone proceeds through the same invariant sequence of stages may encourage some educators not to move students as far along as they would otherwise. The idea that children cannot learn what they are not ready for may inhibit teachers from working on certain concepts and skills. If this leads to substantial differences in student achievement and these differences are associated with race, sex, or ethnicity, the charge of inequity can be made.

A developmental theory asserts the existence of a universal sequence of stages that describes what students are capable of understanding. Piaget's stages of cognitive development provide a familiar example. According to some educators (e.g., Kamii, 1972), the theory can be used to tailor educational programs to individual students because it informs the teacher about the sort of educational content that can most easily be learned at different points in the student's education. Topics that are less dependent on movement to a higher stage can be placed later in the sequence of instruction.

The danger lies in assuming that there is no point in trying to teach a topic to students until they reach a particular stage and then never judging that certain (minority or female) students have reached that stage. The teacher is absolved of the responsibility of trying to teach some (usually difficult or abstract) topics because the students are presumably incapable of learning them. The responsibility shifts from the teacher to the student.

This picture might be true for some topics, but given the difficulty in assessing developmental levels and the problems of deciding which topics can and cannot be learned at certain stages, it is easy to make mistakes (Sharp & Green, 1975, Ch. 9; Duckworth, 1979). Furthermore, though responsibility for not learning is placed on the child (since it is the child who is not ready to learn), the decision about whether an attempt to learn will be undertaken is made by the teacher.

Many developmental theories allow for exceptions--tasks which can be undertaken even though the child's overall stage location suggests that they cannot. Decalage is the Piagetian term for this phenomenon of unequal progress through cognitive stages. This suggests that even though a teacher is correct in assessing a child's developmental stage, it may still be possible to learn topics appropriate to another stage. By deciding a child is not ready for certain material, the teacher is withholding potentially valuable instruction--instruction that may never be provided.

An overemphasis on readiness may lead to inequities if mistaken decisions are associated with race, sex, or some other educationally irrelevant means of classification. What if teachers make more frequent mistaken assessments that black students are not ready for certain mathematics topics? The teacher then does not even attempt to teach black children these topics, and since these are unlikely to be learned outside of school, black children do not learn them. Usually such topics are prerequisites to the study of higher mathematics. One can imagine the further chain of consequences. Of course, if the teacher is right in assessing the pointlessness of trying to teach these students mathematical understanding, the situation is regretable, but not reprehensible. But the possibility for error is unmistakable, and the student may not be given a chance to prove his or her ability to learn. In other words, the judgment regarding readiness may not be based on performance in mathematics, but on some other performance.

This situation is inequitable because it results in differences in achievement along lines of race, culture, or sex (Interpretation 1). Minority students end up with lower achievement in areas associated with future social rewards. Even if the situation did not result in differences in achievement, the situation would still be inequitable because instructional decisions were being made on the basis of race or sex, rather than on educationally relevant grounds (Interpretation 2). Inequity here hangs on the fact that there aren't any reliable means of judging stage attainment. If teachers had a reliable way to assess developmental progress, and if students really could not master some material until they progressed developmentally, then differentiation of instruction would not be inequitable (Interpretation 2). The difference in instruction would be based on educationally relevant factors. Sharp and Green (1975) interviewed British primary school teachers and administrators about the justification for their instructional practices. They found strong verbal commitment to the notion that students are at different stages and that instruction must be tailored to those developmental differences. Yet the teachers, when pressed, admitted the difficulty in telling what stage an individual child had reached, though decisions about what to teach were based on impressions of what children were ready for (Ch. 9). Readiness, in fact, was generally espoused to justify a wide variety of instructional decisions. The investigators found that teacher judgments of readiness were strongly associated with perceptions about how well students conformed to desired school behavior, rather than with perceptions about intelligence or achievement.

If this phenomenon is more generally prevalent, decisions about what to teach will often be made on the basis of social behavior (e.g., conformity to cultural behavior norms) but justified on the basis of student readiness. Teachers may thus deny instruction to students from minority groups whose behavior departs from what they see as appropriate, while citing established developmental theory as justification.

Overemphasis on Student Choice

The developmental view of change as self-directed is generally associated with student-centered approaches to learning and an emphasis on student choice. The assumption is that whatever students select for themselves will connect with their present understanding and reflect their own needs and interests. Sometimes advocates take an extreme position, endorsing the inherent goodness of children and the inevitable bad effects of adult interference.

It is likely that children of different cultures, left to their own devices, will choose different materials and activities. Indeed, this differentiation is viewed as educationally desirable. Not all choices, however, lead to academic success and social mobility. A system of non-interference on the teacher's part could lead to differences in instruction and achievement, differences that may correspond to cultural and sex differences.

In their study, Sharp and Green also found that teachers advocated student choice. This freed them to work with certain children, who turned out to be the bright, articulate ones who most closely fit their picture of the good student. The teachers actually exaggerated inequities by giving greater assistance and direction to students who, for example, chose reading, justifying their involvement on the grounds that these students were interested in reading. The teachers also received praise from administrators and other teachers for running a classroom in which the more difficult students stayed out of trouble by keeping busy.

Like the other dangers discussed, the danger associated with self-directed learning does not necessarily follow from the adoption of a developmental perspective. The temptation, however, is greater for teachers who see themselves as developmentally based than for those who think of themselves as providing direct instruction. Dewey took pains to argue that self-directed learning could provide entry into traditional subject-matter areas for all students, but his followers did not always heed this message.

Self-directed learning can violate an interpretation of equity that forbids racial, cultural, and sex-related differences in achievement (Interpretation 1). Experience suggests that without a special effort to remove them, such differences can develop in classrooms where student choice takes precedence over teacher intervention.

Consequences for Teacher Development

Approaches to teacher education that consider themselves developmental have adopted many of the same practices. (See Feiman & Floden, 1980, and Note 2 for a description of practices associated with three approaches to teacher development.) This follows in part from a belief that teachers should be taught in the same ways they, in turn, should teach their students. Thus, the approaches run the risk of perpetuating the same kinds of inequities previously discussed--first, inequities for teachers and then, through the teachers, for students.

According to one interpretation of equity, educational practices should reflect diversity in cultural norms. Inequity exists when values associated with one subgroup are imposed on everyone. Sprinthall and his students at the University of Minnesota have designed preservice and inservice programs based on cognitive developmental theories (Bernier & Sprinthall, 1977; Glassberg & Sprinthall, 1980; Oja, Note 3). The purpose of these programs is to promote changes to higher levels of ego, moral and conceptual development as defined by Loevinger (1976) and Kohlberg (1969). In other words, the programs adopt as their goals the end states or definitions of maturity embodied in particular cognitive-developmental theories. Sprinthall justifies this approach to goal-setting with the argument that a description of how adults develop can provide a prescription for how teachers ought to be developed. "If...we know what development _is_ then we know what the educational objectives _ought_ to be." (Sprinthall, Note 4, p. 282, emphasis in original).

As we have seen, this practice runs the risk of imposing cultural values associated with a dominant group on all other groups. Gilligan's charge that Kohlberg's theory of moral development reflects a male bias is particularly salient given the preponderance of women in teaching. The qualities she associated with higher stages of moral development in women"--their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others" (1977, p. 55)--may be important ones to cultivate in classrooms. Similarly, the charge that cognitive developmental theories are rooted in Western ethics (Sullivan, Note 5) implies that Kohlberg's theory does injustice to teachers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. The practice of adopting the end state of a particular developmental theory as a goal for teacher education seems to contradict any commitment to multi-cultural education. If teachers are taught that developmental theories are universal and based on empirical evidence, they, in turn, may uncritically impose such a framework on students whose cultures endorse other values.

Another problem grows out of an over-reliance on readiness as a basis for determining when to teach what. In terms of equity, this practice may prevent teachers from encountering certain topics or experiences because someone else has determined that they are not "ready." If these decisions are mistakenly based on racial, sexual, or ethnic lines, one might charge inequity.

For example, Gene Hall and his colleagues at the University of Texas have formulated a model for the adoption of innovations based on Frances Fuller's "developmental" theory of teacher concerns (Hall & Loucks, 1978). In applying the concerns-based adoption model, Hall is careful to match the intervention to the expressed concerns of teachers. The assumption is that earlier concerns must be resolved before later ones can emerge. For example, teachers will not be ready to deal with concerns about the impact of an innovation on their students until earlier concerns about management have been resolved. In fact, the Texas group has found it difficult to move teachers beyond management to higher stages of concern. Is it possible that the over-reliance on "readiness" sets a ceiling on the issues to be raised and retards the very changes they are trying to promote?

If decisions about readiness are made along ethnic, racial, or sexual lines, the possibility of inequity arises. Nothing in the literature on Hall's work suggests this and we have no reason to believe such considerations are involved. But the practice of matching content to present concerns does contain the possibility of withholding exposure to certain topics from certain teachers. Moreover, teachers motivated by this practice may adopt it for their own students and introduce educationally irrelevant criteria for determining readiness.

The first interpretation of equity stipulates that achievement be independent of race, ethnicity, or sex. Educational approaches that emphasize the importance of student choice may inadvertently create a situation in which learning is differentiated along these lines.

Some teacher centers have evolved a "developmental style of inservice" (Devaney, Note 6) that seeks to support teachers in their own directions of growth. What distinguishes center programs from more conventional inservice approaches is their responsiveness to teachers' self-defined needs and their reliance on intrinsic motivation as an incentive to participate. The underlying view of learning as "mental growth spurred from within" leads to a reliance on self-directed learning and choice.

Obviously, different teachers will choose different activities according to their own needs and interests. If these differences parallel racial, ethnic, or sexual lines, however, the possibility of inequity exists. What if whole groups of female teachers avoid math and science materials or only black teachers sign up for a workshop on black English? Clearly, the trade-offs involved in encouraging self-chosen activities transcend the equity issue and call into question the assumption that whatever grows out of individual choice is automatically worthwhile. Here we are especially concerned about the possibility that teachers who come to believe uncritically in the educative worthwhileness of self-directed learning will create or widen inequities.

Responsibilities of an Advocate

We have argued that certain practices associated with a developmental approach to education (K-12 education and teacher education) are inequitable. What does this imply about the future use of a developmental approach?

Supporters of a developmental approach might argue in their defense that no negative conclusions should be drawn, since the examples discussed are misapplications of the approach; an appropriate use of the approach would not be inequitable, or at least has not been shown inequitable by our discussion. Though the practices described may be common among people claiming to follow a developmental approach, those claims are false.

While we grant that our examples may represent departures from some ideal developmental approach to education, that departure does not absolve the advocates of the approach of all responsibility for the actions done in the name of development. The actions may be departures, but they are predictable departures. Advocates of developmental education have the responsibility to warn teachers and teacher educators of the dangers associated with these departures, so that those attempting to apply the approach are aware of the common pitfalls and of the consequences of ignoring those pitfalls.

Advocates of developmental education are not the only ones with responsibility for trying to identify and describe inequitable practices of their students. Any educational approach may be misapplied, and some of those misapplications may be inequitable. The responsibility falls on all advocates.

The responsibility of the developmental advocate also goes beyond problems of equity. Just as drug manufacturers have responsibility for attending to all undesirable effects of their products, including those that result from misuse, the proponents of an educational approach cannot be blind to the wrongs done in the name of the approach. Those wrongs may include inequities but are not restricted to them.

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