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Talents, abilities and educational justice

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ABSTRACT

The assumption that students are differently talented often underlies the public and philosophical debate about the justice of school systems. It is striking that despite the centrality of the notion of ‘talent’ in these debates, the concept is hardly ever explicated. I will suggest two explications: First, philosophers who point to different talents often assume that these are somehow fixed potentials that pose limits to what someone can achieve. According to this understanding, no matter how hard someone tries, she simply cannot perform well due to a lack of talent. Second, talking about different talents can be understood as saying that two students who will receive the same amount of educational resources are nevertheless expected to perform differently in the future. In the public as well as the philosophical debate it is common to assume that educational prospects should be equalized when it comes to unequal social backgrounds, but not when it comes to unequal talents. In this paper, I put into question three reasons that could speak in favor of this assumption: the first refers to the connection between talents and limits, the second to the relation between talents and the transformation of resources and the last one to the idea that talents somehow go back to the person’s true self.

1. Different talents and equal educational opportunities

The assumption that students have different talents influences the setup of school systems. Some schools offer special courses for students who are assumed to be more talented than others. In several countries, there is also a division between different types of schools which builds on the assumption that students are divided by talent. Furthermore, this assumption influences the philosophical debate on educational justice as well as more general debates in political philosophy. These debates deal with the question of whether or not, or to what extent, talent may influence the prospects of educational achievement or chances for well-being.

Within political philosophy, authors often distinguish natural talent from social class background as two distinct factors relevant for social justice. For example, John Rawls’ principle of fair equality of opportunity in A Theory of Justice is limited to ‘those who are at the same level of talent and ability’ and who have ‘the same willingness to use them’ (Rawls, 1999, p. 63). Rawls uses a combination of the principle of fair equality of opportunity and his so-called ‘difference principle’ to keep the advantages that come with higher levels of talent and ability within bounds (pp. 63–64). He also points out that talents are morally arbitrary (p. 65). Moreover,
Rawls does not merely deal with educational opportunities and prospects of educational achievements, but rather with offices and positions open to all. Since Rawls does not really have an education-focused notion of equality of opportunity, its implications for education are not entirely clear. Despite these difficulties in interpreting Rawls, however, his original conception of fair equality of opportunity is at least similar to the following meritocratic principle of equal educational opportunities: ‘An individual’s prospects of educational achievement may be a function of that individual’s effort and talents, but they should not be influenced by her social class background’.1

Unequal educational opportunities, thus understood, could theoretically be compatible with benefitting the less advantaged in society. When wealthy parents are permitted to buy better educational opportunities for their children (e.g. by paying for them to attend elite private schools) this could enhance the total stock of human capital in society. These productivity gains could be redistributed in order to benefit the less advantaged. However, against this line of argument Brighouse and Swift point out that aside from the doubtfulness of the alleged productivity gains and their potential advantages for everyone, education influences an individual’s prospects of gaining attractive jobs, status, and control over work. All of this also has a strong impact on a person’s subjective well-being (Brighouse & Swift, 2014, p. 22). For these reasons, Brighouse and Swift believe that equal educational opportunities do indeed ultimately work to the benefit of the less advantaged in society. Rawls (1999) also seems to hold that a lack of equal educational opportunities is altogether worse for the less advantaged: ‘They would be justified in their complaint not only because they were excluded from certain external rewards of office but because they were debarred from experiencing the realization of self which comes from a skillful and devoted exercise of social duties. They would be deprived of one of the main forms of human good’. (p. 73).

If this is the case however, why should the demand for equal educational opportunities be restricted to equal educational opportunities for the equally talented?2 Why is it just her social class background that should not influence a person’s educational opportunities? Why is it less problematic if her prospects of educational achievement are a function of her talents? One reason could be that it is not possible to even out the prospects for educational achievement for differently talented individuals. Since this cannot be done, it makes no sense to demand that it is done for reasons of justice. In the next paragraph, I will critically discuss this assumption and reveal that a clearer focus on the notion of talent is needed in order to evaluate it.

2. What are talents?

In the current philosophical discussion, some authors talk about ‘developed talents’ or ‘adopted talents’ as well as of ‘natural talents’ and ‘inborn talents’ (e.g. Anderson, 2004, pp. 101–102; Brighouse & Swift, 2014, p. 17; Giesinger, 2011, p. 43; Satz, 2007, p. 630). In general, however, most authors in debates on educational justice just refer to ‘natural’ talents when they use this term (e.g. Calvert, 2014; Sachs, 2012; Shields, 2015). Moreover, most authors have a static rather than dynamic concept of talent where talents are assumed to be somehow fixed.

The concept of talent is closely related to performance and achievement. Talents are what enable or facilitate future achievements. A reference to the talents of a person does not point to current skills or other traits that a person may have, but rather to the future acquisition of these traits. For example, high mathematical talent can enable someone to develop high mathematical abilities in the future. Future achievements, such as musical or mathematical abilities, do not just go back to a person’s genes. They also go back to the fruitful instructions of a highly qualified math teacher or to parents that are dedicated to math themselves. Therefore, some authors criticize the reference to ‘natural’ talents for neglecting these external circumstances. For example, Vopat (2011) points out that talent should be attributed to the environment in which the child was raised: ‘In families that seem to produce more talented individuals, researchers have shown that the environment in which the child was raised accounts for his or her ability, and not the
genetic pool from which they came’ (p. 63). Even if the genetic endowments may play some role, they are surely not decisive for future achievements.

Educational achievements, such as mathematical abilities, do not just go back to the natural endowments of a person. These educational achievements enable or facilitate further achievements, such as the development of even higher abilities. Mathematical abilities that enable the development of even higher mathematical abilities are also identified as ‘talents’ to develop these higher abilities. As soon as any of these abilities are visible, they are the result of the upbringing of a person. This speaks in favor of a concept of developed talents rather than natural talents and of dynamic rather than static talents.

A person has a talent to reach a certain educational goal (e.g. the development of a certain ability) if this person can reach this goal in a sufficiently good educational environment. Thus, talents are potentials to reach educational goals. For example, when a child enters school, she may have the potential to become very good at mathematics. This potential is itself acquired and the result of an educational process. In taking over this perspective, one need not deny that the natural endowments somehow contribute to this potential. One can acknowledge the biological dimension and still emphasize that it was not sufficient to acquire the actual potential, and that all kinds of environmental factors must have been in place to do so. A current potential to acquire certain abilities later on depends on the current abilities and the predicted circumstances up to that point in time. For the prediction of what a person can achieve in the future, a mere reference to her natural endowments is not instructive. This prediction rather goes back to her actual abilities and the expected future circumstances.

Thus to denote certain talents is to say something about a tendency toward future achievements. Developed talents are potentials for future achievements that are based on actual abilities that are themselves developed. Moreover, these potentials can change over time. For instance, a person who has experienced the feeling of being good at something can benefit from that by acquiring additional potentials in other areas. Scheffler (1985) formulates this as follows: ‘A girl who is potentially good at mathematics becomes a different person with actual achievement of mathematical skill. New potentials arise with the realization of the old; ways of thinking about related topics are now open to her that were formerly closed. New feelings of confidence may contribute to potentials for other sorts of learning as well’ (p. 11).

To ascribe a potential cannot be understood as predicting categorically that it will be realized (Scheffler, 1985, p. 46). Instead, Scheffler thinks that we refer to the potential of a person in order to emphasize that it is possible for her to develop certain abilities or that it is easier for her than for others to develop these abilities. I will have a closer look at these two points in the following two sections.

2.1. Talents and the limits of what a person can achieve

If a person is said to have the ‘talent’ to develop certain abilities it is possible for her to develop these abilities, because there are no obvious constraints. This means that it is neither literally impossible nor extremely unlikely for her to develop them. Thus if a person has the potential to develop an ability, it must be realistically possible for her to develop this ability in a certain amount of time with a certain amount of resources. She must have the appropriate internal and external resources to develop the ability.

If a person does not have the potential to develop an ability, she cannot develop this ability even if she would like to develop it. To say that that a person has no natural talent often means that her natural endowments set limits to what she can do. Humans cannot naturally fly or acquire the ability, thus having no natural talent for flying (Brighouse, 2014, p. 16). Usually, a reference to the lack of talent is more specific, though. The point is not that humans as humans lack certain talents (such as a talent for flying), but that specific individuals lack certain talents.
For example, Anderson (2007) points out that ‘every student with the potential and interest should receive a K–12 education sufficient to enable him or her to succeed at a college that prepares its students for postgraduate education’ (p. 597). We can read ‘every student with the potential’ as saying that there are students who would not succeed at a college even if they tried and had the appropriate external resources. They simply cannot succeed since they do not have the potential for it.

The reasons for these obstacles are often assumed to go back to a lack of natural talent. However, these obstacles can also be acquired. Someone may lose a potential due to external circumstances, such as a lack of education. This is also something Scheffler (1985) emphasizes: ‘Certain educational moments must be caught or they are gone forever’ (p. 12). Potentials can disappear because of a lack of external resources or because one did not make use of them.

I may have had the potential to become a good piano player when I was born. However, since I have not played the piano for the last forty years, I no longer have the potential to become a proficient piano player today. Whether or not I did have the potential earlier in my life is a counterfactual question about different courses my life could have taken (what if I had practiced the piano every day for several hours?). Whether or not I did have the natural talent is the least meaningful question here. When I was born someone could have said that I have the potential to become a good piano player. The reasons for this prediction, however, would have been the circumstances of my upbringing and not my biological constitution. Only if the natural constraints on my potential to play the piano were unusually obvious (e.g. if I was born without arms and hands), a reference to natural constraints and to a lack of natural talent would have been plausible. Despite such unusual cases, a prediction of certain obstacles by a mere reference to our natural endowments is hardly ever possible.

If someone has the potential to develop certain abilities, there are no obvious constraints on developing them at a given point in time (e.g. no obvious constrains today to acquire higher mathematical skills in the future). This point in time is the moment when one attributes the talent; what we thereby take into consideration are the current abilities, such as current mathematical skills. The potential to acquire further abilities, however, can change over time. Someone may lose a potential, but someone may also acquire a potential that is not visible at a given point in time. One may not be able to predict that someone will be able to acquire certain skills, but this may nevertheless happen due to unforeseeable future circumstances. At a later point in time, this may become more obvious and thus one may change one’s prediction about what someone can possibly achieve.

Thus, it is not the case that a lack of talent just goes back to natural constraints. The limits to what a person can achieve are not just the results of her natural endowments; the developed talent is also the result of a person’s social circumstances. I do not deny that its development is based on genetic preconditions that may differ from individual to individual. Inequalities of natural endowments might be obstacles to educational achievements. However, in most cases, the obstacles at a given point in time will not just go back to natural endowments. They also go back to the social circumstances of the respective individuals up to that point and depend upon the social circumstances from that point onwards.

2.2. Different talents, same resources, different results

In the last paragraph, I started with the notion of (natural as well as developed) talents as limits. They enable future achievements, whereas the lack thereof sets the limits of what a person can possibly achieve in the future. A focus on talents as limits, however, cannot account for the comparative notion of talent that we refer to when we speak of someone being more or less talented than others. Brighouse (2014) points to this aspect when he talks about inequalities in people’s talents: ‘All it means to say that two people are unequally talented is that they
have innate characteristics that interact with the environment to produce differences in capabilities’ (p. 16).

The idea is that differences in talents entail differences in later achievements. We can apply this idea to natural as well as to developed talents. Let us consider two persons A and B. Their developed abilities $A_1$ and $B_1$ at $t_1$ interact with the environment in distinct ways and thus lead to different abilities at $t_2$. If a person is more talented than the other, she can reach more on a scale of skills (e.g. on a scale of mathematical skills; from low to high) or she can achieve more with less resources. The first possibility points to certain limits again. Some children cannot reach the high end of the scale, no matter how much they try and how good their future education will be. The latter points to different ways of transforming educational resources into abilities. With the same future exercise and training, some children will achieve a higher level of skills than others. Having more talent, thus, means that given the same educational input (e.g. the same amount of time for practice or the same instructions by a teacher) a higher level of skill is likely to be achieved. Talking about talent here refers to the way in which a person can use educational resources.3

Given the same educational resources, a more talented child will learn more in a given amount of time than a comparatively less talented child. Even if a child does not have better mathematical skills than another at the time of entering school, she can have a higher ability to follow the math teacher’s instructions. The child’s potential at $t_1$, thus, contains a further present ability at $t_1$: the ability to use and transform the teacher’s instructions for the development of future abilities. This present ability to use the given educational resources is also not just a product of the child’s natural talents but greatly depends on her upbringing and developed characteristics, e.g. a sense of self-worth.

Thus, a common way of speaking about talents and potentials refers to the idea that the same amount of educational resources or practice can lead to different educational results. For example, by referring to unequal mathematical talents, we explain why two children who were given the same amount of teaching have developed different levels of mathematical skills. This does not say anything, though, about the limits of what a child can possibly achieve given maximum input. If one of the children were given extra time for practice or additional teaching, she might have reached the same level of mathematical ability as the other one.

To sum up this point, I distinguished between the concept of talent as a limit to what a person can possibly achieve and the concept of talent as a facilitator of future achievements. According to the latter, if two children are equally talented at $t_1$, they will foreseeably perform equally well at $t_2$ if they receive the same educational resources and invest the same amount of time into their learning process until $t_2$. However, if the lesser talented child receives educational resources of a higher quality until $t_2$, she may perform equally well at $t_2$. In this case, both of the children might have acquired the same ability to process future input by the math teacher (for instance, because the formerly slower learner has now gained enough confidence to be able to pick up the teacher’s explanations as quickly as the other one). As a result, even though they had different degrees of talent at $t_1$, they are equally talented at $t_2$. The formerly less talented child now has acquired new abilities and thus both children now have the same capacities for future achievements. Therefore, at $t_2$ they have the same developed talent.

There are two ways to respond to the unequal talents of persons A and B. First, one can aim at equal educational achievements of A and B at $t_2$ despite their differences in talents at $t_1$. Second, one can allow the unequal educational achievements at $t_2$ that follow from their different talents. The assumption that unequal talents justify unequal educational success is widely shared. But why are natural or developed talents allowed to influence the educational success? Why do so many people assume that educational prospects should be equalized when it comes to unequal social backgrounds, but not when it comes to unequal talents? In the following sections I will discuss three reasons that could speak in favor of this assumption: the first refers to the connection between talents and limits (3), the second to the relation between talents and...
the transformation of resources (4) and the last one to the idea that talents somehow go back to the person's inner capacities and true self (5). I will show though, that these reasons are largely to be rejected.

3. Missing talents as limits to more equality?

Why should one aim at equal educational prospects when it comes to unequal social backgrounds, but not when it comes to unequal talents? One reason seems to be that educational prospects cannot be equalized, because due to a lack of talent there are limits of what some pupils can possibly achieve.

The focus on the allegedly natural limits of what a person can achieve often leads to the assumption that these limits are inalterable. This explains why talents are often seen as fixed limits, but it offers no justification for this view. A child that has fewer capacities than other children when entering school will in many cases be able to achieve the same educational results – she might just need more time and resources. The limits of what this child can achieve also depend significantly on external circumstances. Thus altering these circumstances (e.g. to give more resources to children who lack certain capacities when entering school) can change these limits.

The philosophical discussion often explicitly or implicitly presumes that humans are born with unequal talents. This static notion of talent entails that talents cannot be changed. In rejecting this position, one might take the opposite stance and claim that unequal educational success is entirely due to unequal external conditions. According to this view, a person's environment is decisive for her development of individual capacities. Varying external conditions thus explain the differences in educational outcomes. Talents are not just a natural contingency but changeable and not predetermined. This notion of talent contrasts the static view by presenting the human individual as a mere product of cultural practices and social interaction, rather than one of primarily genetic disposition.

In contrast to these extreme positions, it is plausible to assume that both genetic predispositions and external conditions play a relevant role in shaping a child’s physical and mental development. A restricted focus on natural endowments is usually inappropriate in order to explain the genesis of the actual abilities. These developed abilities go back to the natural endowments as well as to the external circumstances. In light of their close interaction since early embryonic development however, it is almost impossible to consider these factors separately. These aspects cannot be separated from each other. For this reason, Howe (2015) even calls a mere reference to natural talents ‘illusive’: ‘Natural talents are illusive. They have no manifestation independent of environmental influences; they function as unobserved posits used to explain differences in observed human performance’ (p. 188). One cannot acquire new natural talents and one cannot acquire a developed talent for which one did not have the necessary natural talent. However, the influence of the natural endowments on this developed talent is in most cases invisible and often overstated.

It is often impossible to decide which limits stem from genetic disposition and which go back to socialization. Especially when trying to detect the supposedly ‘natural’ differences between people, we are faced with this epistemic difficulty. But even if this problem were to be solved, it remains to be shown why the distinction should be relevant at all. In many cases it seems to be irrelevant by what means the limits are brought about. Why should it matter whether a child is not able to graduate in the following eight years due to a lack of natural talents or because she was not properly cared for in the first years of her life? For this particular child, obviously, this is not important anymore.

Of course, this is different when we are considering children who have just recently been born or are yet to be born. We could try to make sure that the opportunities they have at this early point in life persist, e.g. by arranging the school system accordingly. Equality of opportunity can then be understood as demanding that only the unchangeable sets limit to what a person
can achieve. On this basis we could demand to spend more resources on early age support and education, to support families in poverty and to make sure that a child’s opportunities for social participation are not undermined right at the beginning. Limits to what individuals can achieve are not only due to natural dispositions but largely depend on external conditions. It is important to be aware of the possibility to change these factors.

Moreover, even natural endowments do not necessarily set absolute limits. A lack of natural talent might just make the attainment of specific educational goals costlier or more time-consuming. A reference to a lack of talent is often meant to denote the limits of what a person can achieve in the future. Combined with a focus on natural talents, this suggests that these limits are given by fixed natural constraints that cannot be overcome. This conception of fixed potentials is often misleading. Not only do a person’s natural endowments set the limits of what she can achieve in the future, but these limits are also set by the external circumstances from now on. Moreover, her current developed talent could have been different if the external circumstances would have been different up until now. This diagnosis may not matter for her future educational success (her potential may nevertheless be irretrievably lost), but it matters for the question of how we organize the educational process for other future children (such that they do not lose their potential due to the impoverished external circumstances). Furthermore, even for this person, the potential for future achievements may not be lost, if she receives an extra amount of educational resources in the future. A reference to a lack of natural talent can be misleading since it neglects this possibility.

In many cases it is just a matter of the expense at which an individual can accomplish a specific educational goal. A less talented student might need more time and effort to achieve the same outcome than another one. But it is not just the student who will have to put in extra effort. Additional educational resources will be needed, e.g. more detailed instructions by a teacher. With the same amount of educational resources, a more talented student can achieve more. Are we supposed to compensate for this fact by providing the less talented with more educational resources? Or should everyone receive the same amount of educational resources? I will have a closer look at these competing positions in the next section.

4. Meritocratic conceptions and educational resources

The meritocratic conception holds that one should aim at equal educational prospects when it comes to unequal social backgrounds, but not when it comes to unequal talents. In the following, I will argue that a focus on developed rather than natural talents and a focus on talents as facilitators rather than limits challenge this view.

We have seen that the term ‘talents’ often denotes the limits of what an individual (who supposedly lacks that talent) can possibly achieve, even with a large amount of resources. Moreover, I pointed out that talents influence the amount of resources that an individual needs for acquiring a certain degree of performance and achievement. Differently talented individuals are not equally effective in translating resources into abilities. Thus two equally talented children who enter school might foreseeably perform equally well at a later stage if they receive the same amount of educational resources from now on. Two differently talented children might foreseeably perform differently at a later stage if they receive the same amount of educational resources.

The meritocratic conception does not speak in favor of equal educational outcomes for differently talented children. It allows natural talents to be influential even if the differences in natural talents would not constitute a limit to what is possible. If the differences in natural talents where relevant to the amount of resources one had to invest in order to achieve certain educational outcomes, then the meritocratic conception did not tell us to invest more resources into the education of the lesser talented children. According to the meritocratic conception, educational results are allowed to depend upon talent and effort, whereas they should not depend on
the social class background. Therefore the meritocratic conception allows that those who are
differently talented by nature receive the same amount of educational resources. The meritocratic
conception just questions the influence of the social background on different educational
outcomes (for example, when wealthier parents can buy a better education for their children).

By focusing on developed talents, however, giving more resources to the lesser talented students
can also be justified with regard to the meritocratic conception of educational justice. The merito-
cratic conception holds that one’s social class background should not influence an individual’s pros-
spects of educational achievement. An appropriate conception of talent reveals the high impact that
the social environment has on developed talents. This justifies the demand that educational resources
should be distributed assigning a larger share to the less talented. In this respect, proponents of the
meritocratic conception should be more sensible to the notion of developed talents.

Moreover, the distinction between talents as limits and as facilitators could diminish the
intuitive credibility of the meritocratic conception. The meritocratic conception might be plausible
if one considers natural talents as limits, but with regard to talents as facilitators, it is an open
question as to why one should endorse it. If a person with lesser natural talent required more
resources in order to reach the same educational result, why should she, from a perspective of
justice, nevertheless receive the same amount of educational resources? With the same amount of
resources, those who are more talented obtain the better results. From various perspectives of just-
ice, however, the lesser talented child should receive more educational resources (for an overview
about these perspectives and their implications for different talents, see Meyer, 2014, 2016).

With the same amount of resources, the lesser talented child will achieve less. One might
justify this by referring to the lack of talent as a limit. If, however, there is no such principled
constraint, there are various reasons to give more resources to the less talented, even if they
were less talented by nature. More importantly, though, the awareness of the impact that
the social environment can have on developed talents justify the demand that a larger share
of educational resources should be given to those who have more difficulties in learning.
For example, they should receive a larger share of the teacher’s time or they should receive
additional resources for smaller classes and highly qualified teachers.

The opposite position demands that those who are more talented should be provided
with more resources to develop these talents. Vopat (2011) judges this idea to be widespread:
“We tend to think that differences in natural talents and abilities justify differences in access
to resources. So, when a child exhibits a natural talent that other children lack, providing
the resources necessary to develop that ability in the talented child is justified” (p. 65).
An important reason for this view seems to be that the development of one’s natural talents
contribute to the development of one’s ‘true self’. In the next section, I will elucidate this view
more closely and subsequently reject it.

5. Talents and self-realization

The static notion of natural talents refers to a predefined disposition that will unfold under
suitable conditions. According to the static notion, this disposition decisively influences school suc-
cess. From this point of view, the genetic material almost completely predetermines the develop-
mental possibilities of a human being. This static conception assumes that it cannot be influenced
by targeted educational and training measures. While these assumptions are not justifiable scientif-
ically (and modern philosophers would not deny this), there is still a dominant focus on natural
talents within philosophy, and there is a widespread metaphor that fixed talents unfold.

Children with high potentials, talents or natural endowments are sometimes said to be ‘gifted’
(Merry 2008). A person is gifted by her static genome, which is given to her from the beginning
of life and which is not the product of a development process. The actual realization of the gen-
etically determined possibilities is said to be promoted by helping the gifted to ‘unfold’ their
talents. Since the talents we identify are *developed* talents though, this metaphor is often not suitable. Our developed talents are not given to us at the time of our birth, waiting to unfold. Instead, our developed talents are the contingent results of the circumstances of our upbringing, and they can change over time.

Furthermore, talents also do not constitute a kind of underlying ‘real self’, even though this view is widespread. From this perspective, the allegedly gifted individuals should be supported in unfolding their ‘self’. Shields (2015) dubs the development of one’s talents to a certain extent ‘sufficient self-realization’ (p. 54). Ben-Shahar (2016) also remarks that ‘[o]ne could argue that one’s talent, ability, and potential are a part of their self, and therefore should not be compromised for the sake of equality’ (p. 96).

I do not deny that we should support and enable individuals to develop their talents. The reference to that person’s ‘self’, however, is easily misguiding in this context. Scheffler also has some concerns that are relevant here. He emphasizes that people have different potentials for entirely different things. It is not obvious which of these should be regarded as valuable and thus be declared as ‘gifts’, ‘talents’ or her ‘true self’. Moreover, a person has different potentials which cannot be jointly realized: ‘The potential for the one career and the potential for the other may both be genuinely possessed by a given youth but that does not imply that he has the potential for both together. Thus, they are not, alas, jointly realizable’ (Scheffler, 1985, p. 15).

Thus, it is not at all clear what one should identify as the underlying potential of a person that is worth being realized, because it constitutes her ‘true self’. Moreover, the self is constituted by autonomous decisions, for instance, when a person decides to *realize* certain potentials. Suppose a child has the potential to become an outstanding musician and suppose we could somehow identify this potential. Would we, in any way, be promoting her ‘true self’ if we enabled her to accomplish musical excellence? If someone autonomously decides to *not* develop a capability (e.g. by preferring other things over practicing the piano for many hours a day) then this does not seem to be a failure of or a deviation from her true self. And if a lesser talented child has a strong desire to improve her musical abilities, it is not clear why this child should have a weaker claim on musical education than the other child.

It is far from obvious that our potential to develop certain abilities is particularly relevant for our self. Ben-Shahar (2016) explains this as follows: ‘Potential can be frustrated for many reasons and therefore it is further away from the core of people’s identities than the abilities which they actually possess’ (p. 96). Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that only our *natural* talent makes us who we really are. If this where the case, then the most significant moment for one’s true self would be at the time of birth. At this point in time, the environment has had the least impact on one’s potentials. But we would not assume that for that reason a newborn child is somehow ‘closer’ to her true self.

I do not want to deny that school education should take into account the children’s individual strengths and what they enjoy doing (which also often correlates). Aiming at equal educational outcomes despite different talents seem to disregard individual strengths and interests. But it does not follow that the allegedly natural talent should fully determine educational success, instead pupils should have the possibility to participate in shaping their own path in life. It is important to stress the value of autonomy in education and particularly to let pupils develop the abilities that they identify with the most. Often these will be abilities that a pupil has confidence in, and that she assumes to be able to develop to a relatively high level. It will be those abilities which she finds easy to develop, e.g. when she is able to pick up instructions very easily and learn quickly. In this respect, the self-assessment of one’s own talents can be relevant to where one sees oneself in the future. By declaring a pupil to be untalented or less talented however, a school can also obstruct many opportunities for a child. Thus the setup of the school system and individual teachers should not continuously limit children’s potentials by denying their ‘talents’. Instead, a school should contribute to opening up possibilities and expanding limits in a way to enable children to succeed in what they want to achieve.
6. Conclusion

Talents are potentials to develop certain abilities. A lack of talent entails that a person cannot develop specific abilities; on the other hand, being particularly talented means being able to easily develop a certain ability. Talents are *facilitators* for future achievements, and sometimes a lack of talent also sets *limits* to the possibility of future achievements.

Whether a person can develop an ability and to what level she is able to do so often depends on external factors. Therefore, one should be careful not to be misled by a reference to ‘natural talents’ and to be too quick in proclaiming limits independent of external circumstances. Equal educational outcomes cannot be pursued by people with unequal natural talents, if some of these talents pose *limits*. They can, however, be pursued by people that are unequal in their natural talents as *facilitators*. In addition, one should acknowledge that the talents we identify are *developed* talents. They are not fixed, can change over time and with additional resources, differences in developed talents can diminish.

A person’s talents should also not be associated with her ‘nature’ or ‘true self’ that unfolds when her talents are developed. Schooling should take into account individual strengths and interests, no matter if these are due to ‘natural’ talents or to the circumstances of the children’s upbringing. Aside from recognizing individual strengths however, school education should open up possibilities and expand pupils’ limits as far as possible, instead of justifying alleged limits by attributing a lack of talent.

Notes

1. Brighouse and Swift (2014, p. 15) call this the ‘meritocratic conception’ and define it in the same way as I do here. They also state that the meritocratic conception ‘is closely related to Rawls’s principle of fair equality of opportunity’ (Brighouse & Swift, 2014, p. 16). Schouten (2012, p. 473) also claims that we can think of it ‘as an education-specific analogue to John Rawls’ fair equality of opportunity principle’. For a discussion of different notions of equal opportunity, including equal educational opportunity, see Meyer (2016).

2. This restriction is very common. A rare exemption is Ben-Shahar (2016), who explicitly argues for equal educational outcomes.

3. This is also how Kollar and Loi (2015) explain the concept of talent: ‘A has more talent than B means that she needs less exercise and training of an ability in order to achieve equally good results, other things being equal’ (p. 38).

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