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The Role of Social Justice Theory in Education Studies.

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Abstract

This chapter argues for a deeper approach to social justice which can support the interconnected thinking that education studies programmes aim to foster. Beyond 'harmony, equity and justice' which can arguably present a surface-level and easily dismissed notion aligned simply with 'fairness', including a theory of social justice throughout a degree programme can enable students to more fully appreciate the systemic nature of justice on multiple scales and equip them to truly understand and navigate the systems they will work within as future educators. Nancy Fraser's theory of Democratic Justice, with its focus on recognition, redistribution, representation and participatory parity provides a more thorough exploration of issues and supports the critical questioning and orientation towards social justice that education studies degree programmes aspire to foster.

Summary points

- Education is often touted as having the potential to equalise society through social mobility. However, society is far from equal and social differences are reflected in educational outcomes and experiences.
- Education cannot be considered in isolation but must be viewed in light of its relationship with multiple social, political and economic factors which lay bare the need for social justice.
- The role of social justice, while superficially present in education studies programmes, can be strengthened using a theory of social justice.
- Nancy Fraser's theory of democratic justice, with its focus on recognition, redistribution and representation, is ideally placed to provide a conceptual framework for understanding social justice in education in all of its interconnected facets.
- This can equip students on education studies programmes with the tools to understand the mechanisms behind injustice, to pose concrete solutions and make connections that lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding.

Introduction

One of the biggest claims made of education is its potential to enhance social mobility. As stated by Ravitch (2010 cited in Smith, 2018), schools are still the main way a democracy enables citizens to attain social mobility. Education is, supposedly, the great equaliser. However, the global pandemic highlighted in a very public way that pupils' home circumstances can make all the difference. Closing schools and putting education online has shown the intersections between education and society in a stark light. Learners in homes with multiple digital devices, a decent internet connection, private and quiet spaces to learn and carers with the ability, desire and means to provide support generally fared better than those without. Research has shown that after the first lockdown in 2020 'the relative learning loss for disadvantaged pupils was equivalent to undoing between a third and two-thirds of the progress made in the last decade in closing the disadvantage gap in primary schools' (DfE, 2021: 9). Clearly, to tackle disadvantage, education must be examined in light of the multiple social, political and economic factors that influence educational outcomes. After all, as Smith (2018: 207) notes, 'the *most* important factors in determining future life chances lie firmly outside the school gates.' Without a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms behind these inequalities and the ability to pose concrete solutions, there is a danger that sticking-plaster solutions continue to be posed for complex issues. A theory of social justice can provide the conceptual framework for this understanding, enabling you as students to more fully appreciate the systemic nature of justice on multiple scales and equip you to truly understand and navigate the systems you will work within as future educators.

This chapter begins with an examination of the place of social justice within education studies programmes and suggests that a more thorough approach is needed if education is to be a vehicle for social justice. It then explores the purpose and role of theory and suggests Fraser's theory of democratic justice as one approach that can support students to gain an understanding of justice beyond simply what is 'fair'. This is then applied to a scenario of those with protected characteristics, which illustrates how theory can be applied within education studies programmes. Finally, the chapter considers how Fraser's theory can enhance students' interconnected thinking and how an understanding of theory and the key questions it enables us to ask, can form a strong framework of justice within which to examine education and one's own place as a socially just educator.

Education studies and social justice

Education studies programmes were created in response to a need to expand the study of education outside of teacher training (Bartlett and Burton, 2020). The subject takes a broad view of education and provides opportunities for students to examine its sociological, historical, philosophical and psychological aspects. Indeed, these four areas are considered the foundations of education alongside more recent additions of political, economic, technological and international perspectives. The power of education studies programmes lies in the way that they open our minds to different ways of thinking. This contrasts with teacher training which arguably trains students to reproduce the status quo in the classroom, stripped of the time to really debate and take a critical view of current practice. Indeed, Yogeve and Michaeli (2011, cited in Tezgiden and Cakcak, 2016:131) summarise the 'problem of teacher education' generally as follows:

‘Contemporary teacher training demarcates itself within the boundaries of inculcating disciplinary knowledge, developing didactic skills, and nurturing self-awareness. Graduates of traditional teacher training ... perceive themselves mainly as knowledge brokers and do not think about or question the basic concepts of the system in which they work, the curriculum they teach, or the teaching methods they apply.’

One of the freedoms of education studies programmes is the space to question how things are and how things should be, and to do that a critical approach needs to be developed. The QAA Benchmark Standards (QAA, 2019) define education studies programmes and they mention criticality 9 times in relation to critical engagement, capabilities, analysis, reflection, debate and understanding. Critical skills play a central role in the subject and it is this questioning, debate and new thinking that enables problems to be explored and a different future for education to be imagined. By comparison, social justice is explicitly mentioned only twice (QAA, 2019:9) but it is implicit in several other statements. For example, that education studies programmes will include: ‘the role of education in human rights and ecological issues’ (p4), debates about values and social engagement as they relate to communities and societies (p4) and that students are to accommodate new ideas related to social inclusion (p7).

Questions to consider

In the benchmark statements, why do you think that ‘critical’ is so prevalent yet ‘social justice’ is not? Do you think that social justice should be made more explicit and what might an advantage or disadvantage of this be?

There are different ways of looking at social justice. Political parties all make claims to social justice, but each with very different means to achieve it and these are hotly contested (for a good discussion of this see Smith 2018, chapter 1). Political claims to social justice appear to rest on ideals seen by each proponent as common sense, rather than an in-depth examination of what may work that is grounded in theory. Theory helps us to understand the mechanisms behind what is happening. It enables us to gain a deeper understanding and as Costley states, ‘theories make us think!’ (Costley, 2006:5). Without theory, there is a risk that we build interventions based on untested assumptions, our own life experiences, intuitions (‘folk intuitions’) and gut feelings (Muthukrishna and Henrich, 2019) whereas theory can tune our intuition so that we can spot when something feels off (Costley, 2006).

Theory also provides principles for specific predictions. Without these, disparate notions of social justice may be drawn upon to justify a chosen course of action, yet injustice remains because those notions are weak or ‘surface level’ and may in some cases reinforce the social inequality they are trying to redress. When things are disconnected from theory or based on ‘folk intuitions’ (Muthukrishna and Henrich, 2019), moves towards social justice for all will be hampered. Our efforts may be well intentioned, but they will be inherently limited. Nevertheless, theory is not a panacea. No theory is perfect and none can account for every influencing factor - but theory can provide the best framework for analysis, prediction and

the planning of actions which are based on thorough reasoning and tested thinking which is more likely to have a greater chance of success.

Questions to consider

Do you think theory can provide concrete benefits as described above or do you think that theory is abstract and does not link to everyday experiences? How far do you think teaching and learning often relies on untested assumptions or 'folk intuitions'?

As shown through the benchmark statements, social justice should already be present in education studies programmes. However, how this is discussed can sometimes tend to rely on an arguably surface level approach rather than a structured theory which can provide a framework for the deeper critical questioning needed for the achievement of social justice. Often, social justice is introduced to students in terms of justice as harmony, justice as equity and justice as equality (Ruitenberg and Vokey, 2010, cited in Smith, 2018:15). This is helpful for an introduction to ideas around social justice during the first year of an undergraduate programme and it is often repeated across modules for emphasis, but this is often not developed to any greater depth through the second and third years representing a missed opportunity to achieve that deeper understanding.

The theory presented here, Fraser's theory of Democratic Justice (Fraser, 2010), provides a framework for looking at social justice within the current political era of globalisation. It examines systems and processes that influence people's participation in social life but which people may be powerless to affect. There are other theories of social justice that also offer valuable insights to education. For example Sen's Capability Approach focuses more on an individual and their ability to do or be things they value (their 'capabilities') so that they live a life they find meaningful (Vaughn and Walker, 2012). Both theories have much to offer a study of education but Fraser's focus is arguably more objective, enabling a systemic examination of justice on many different scales and for all groups within society. Fraser's theory enables examination of justice across many topics and areas of study which may or may not be things an individual values personally but nonetheless remain important to someone's role as a future educator.

Fraser's theory of democratic justice

For Fraser, social justice is defined as 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2010: 16). Participatory parity means that everyone is able to participate equally as peers in social life. For there to be justice, there must be participatory parity and for this to occur, Fraser's three 'fundamental dimensions of justice' must be satisfied (Fraser, 2010:16):

- The dimension of **redistribution** (and the associated injustice of **maldistribution**) typically relates to economic structures and states that resources and opportunities must be equally distributed to all. Keddie (2012, cited in Vincent 2020:43) notes some of the consequences of maldistribution stating that 'Principles of distributive justice recognise the links between poverty, poor schooling performance, early

school leaving and future economic deprivation and social discontent/dysfunction.’ Lynch and Lodge (2002) also state that social differentiations, including gender, are comparable to differentiations of social class in depth and scale.

- The dimension of **recognition** (and associated injustice of **misrecognition**) states that everyone must be given equal status and respect in society, otherwise cultural domination by more powerful groups may occur.
- The dimension of **representation** (and the associated injustice of **misrepresentation**) states that everyone must have their voices heard equally in decision making. Lynch and Lodge (2002) describe it well: ‘Having political equality is about ensuring that one’s definition of the situation is not disregarded, that one’s voice is equal to that of others, that one is given the space and capacity to act autonomously’ (Lynch and Lodge, 2002:6).

All three dimensions relate to structures and practices within institutions (including schools) and within societies from the local to the global that may prevent people from participating equally as peers in social life (Fraser, 2010). Fraser’s theory has something to say to the issues experienced in education and schooling today because not everyone participates equally as peers and because through asking questions of recognition, redistribution and representation it deals with the cultural, economic and political aspects of social life – foundational aspects on which the study of education rests.

Fraser’s theory has been used to examine education in various ways, all of which apply across topics within education studies programmes. Participatory parity has been applied to the structures of institutions such as schools (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Keddle, 2012), national policy affecting Scottish young people (Mackie and Tett, 2013), rural science education (Eppley, 2017), educational access of mobile children in India (Dyer, 2010) and Lifelong Learning in light of Sustainable Development Goal 4 within UNESCO (Vargas, 2017). Whether it is the treatment of those with SEND, the difference in resources between schools in urban, rural and coastal areas, the needs of child carers or those of minority communities, Fraser’s theory takes us beyond our own ideologies and takes us deeper into the systemic causes of and mechanisms behind such barriers. It arguably avoids those ‘folk intuitions’ and can contribute to concrete predictions about successful action.

Applying Fraser’s theory to education studies programmes

Common to education studies programmes is an exploration of the schooling experiences of minority groups, including those with protected characteristics, and Fraser’s theory can be applied to this. For example, as students, you may explore scenarios of pupils with protected characteristics in school, perhaps pupils who either identify as LGBTQ+ themselves and/or come from same-sex families. Their position in school may be demonstrated through a lack of visibility in textbooks and curricula resources or visibility may be present but in a way that reinforces negative stereotypes or heteronormativity. Posters placed in school may display a purely heteronormative family ideal, for example. If this is combined with teacher-talk and materials, such as reading books, which repeat this

ideal and do not recognise diversity, then learners from same-sex families do not see themselves represented. They are not afforded equal status and they suffer the injustice of **misrecognition**. Further, they may be denied, either explicitly or implicitly, the opportunity to discuss their families and see them celebrated in the classroom, displaying low cultural status. They receive a message, spoken or unspoken, that they do not hold the same cultural power as other groups. It would take a very courageous child to speak about their family and risk the rejection of dismissal in the face of an environment which implicitly tells them that their families are not as valuable. Their low cultural status and powerlessness to change it, may contribute to 'economic marginalisation and subordination' (Phillips 1999 in Lynch and Lodge 2002:195), representing **maldistribution**.

In being unable to challenge this directly or simply to talk about their own family, they suffer **misrepresentation** – their definition of the situation is disregarded and their voice is not equal to those of others (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). These pupils are not able to participate equally in discussions surrounding families, which is a common topic certainly in primary classrooms, and they are denied **participatory parity**. In this scenario, we see all three of Fraser's dimensions of justice but at its heart is the injustice of misrecognition, which has been generative of the injustices of maldistribution and misrepresentation.

On your programme you may also study educational policy and legislation. You may look at the Equalities Act 2010 and note that it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. You may examine some school policies and note that there is no mention of LGBTQ+ pupils or diverse families in curriculum policies. Lynch and Lodge (2002) examined school policy and found that where groups were invisible in the discourse of policy, staff did not have the vocabulary with which to discuss an issue with pupils which led to **misrecognition** and prejudicial attitudes in schools. Using the theory as a lens to form questions, you can begin to interrogate policy from the perspective of social justice. Drawing on your previous exploration of pupil's experiences in school you can now include policy as well and develop a deeper understanding of whether the educational environment is just or unjust not only at a personal level but at a systems level too, since policy so strongly influences behaviour at multiple levels within an organisation.

When you go on to consider issues of race, gender and disability in education, as are often found within education studies programmes, you can use the theory to explore intersectionality. For example, what is your experience of **participatory parity** if you are LGBTQ+ and a person with disabilities? What are some of the additional nuances within this experience and how might action to achieve participatory parity change in light of multiple injustice? Beyond simply knowing that the experience may be 'unfair', you are empowered – through the use of theory - to ask specific questions and consider specific actions that might need redress. Might action on policy help? Might action on classroom resources help? Might steps towards setting up fora where those experiencing the injustice can be heard help? Might it be all these things and more? What might the knock-on effects of these actions be for other groups and how might we evaluate the justice of that?

Questions to consider

Consider your education studies programme overall. Where are opportunities given to discuss social justice? In what way is social justice described?

Choose an example of where protected characteristics have been included and apply Fraser's three dimensions of justice: can you see how Fraser's theory can bring a greater depth to your understanding?

Conclusion

Using social justice theory, as students you are equipped to analyse situations, make connections and ask critical questions. You are empowered to understand the mechanisms behind issues of injustice and consider concrete actions. Having this understanding alongside other key threads of education studies programmes, including personal reflection on your values as future educators and what you may choose for your careers, you are given the tools to recognise your own place within social justice and to plan actions to make the education of the coming years more just.

Suggestions for further reading

- **Vincent, C (2020) *Nancy Fraser, Social Justice and Education*, Routledge, Oxon**
This edited volume explores some of the philosophical aspects of Fraser's theory and deals with some of its main critiques. This will aid in understanding her theory in a more nuanced way beyond what has been possible to explore in this chapter.
- **Lynch K and Lodge A (2002) *Equality and Power in Schools – Redistribution, Recognition and Representation*, Routledge, Oxon**
This applies Fraser's theory to the Irish school system and provides a comprehensive account of the many different aspects of education present in schools both in terms of systems and different group identities.
- **Smith, E (2018) *Key Issues in Education and Social Justice*, 2nd Edition, Sage, London**
This latest edition explores social justice more broadly including some intersections between education and society. It provides a helpful introduction to the topic for those new to the area whilst also serving as a concise reminder of the main debates.

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