Inequalities and Education – A Conceptual Note

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a. The context

NECE is coming to Glasgow this year to discuss one of the most fundamental questions, not only in citizenship education, but in education in general.

The choice of Glasgow is not a coincidence. The city is understood to exhibit extreme social inequalities, leading to consequent discrepancies in health, mortality rates, and life expectancy across its different areas. The term, the 'Glasgow effect', has been coined to describe the extreme differences between areas of affluence, in which mortality rates and health match those of similar areas in the UK, and deprived areas with high mortality rates and lower life expectancy than the rest of Western Europe (Walsh et al., 2010)[1].

Particularly in terms of child poverty, over 34% of the city's child residents were estimated to be living in poverty in 2017, a figure which is higher than all the surrounding local authorities, and other Scottish cities. In terms of distribution, over 59% of the children in some neighbourhoods live in poverty, compared to around 5% in other parts of the city.[2]

However, while the contrast may be greater in Glasgow than in other UK cities, growing social inequality is a concern for the whole of the UK. An observation included in the introductory report of a recent study launched by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) (www.ifs.org.uk) illustrates this: "The lowest-earning working households in the UK today earn little more than their counterparts in the mid-1990s. In contrast, middle-earning households earn about 20%-30% more than they did back then, and the highest-earning households around 40% more" (Joyce & Xu, 2019: 6-7).

However, deprivation and inequalities not only relate to money and income. Echoing the observations of those with lived experiences of poverty, and those who describe deprivation as a cause of stress, citing its effects on mental health (McGarvey, 2017), the IFS report states **"Inequality exists in the stresses and strains of the family life which shape the environment in which children grow up. It is the divergence in life expectancy between deprived and affluent areas, and the growing burden of poor mental health among disadvantaged groups. It is the pulling apart of successful cities from coastal and ex-industrial towns, where traditional jobs have been lost and young people have few prospects of upward mobility"** (Ibid: 4).

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[1] In 2015-16 men in the most deprived areas were expected to live 26 fewer years in good health than those in the least deprived areas, and were expected to die 13 years earlier. Women in the same areas were expected to live 22 fewer years in good health than those in the least deprived areas, and were expected to die 9 years earlier. For further information visit: Scottish Poverty and Inequality Commission https://povertyinequality.scot/

[2] Data from various sources: The child poverty map of the UK 2018, End Child Poverty, ONS, Scottish Household Survey, Scottish Government.
Source: https://www.understandingglasgow.com/indicators/children/poverty/overview

b. Social Inequalities in Education

The inequalities that NECE 2019 will address concern young people's educational experiences, focusing on social exclusion in education.

Social exclusion in education "covers the physical absence of socially vulnerable young people in education, but also comprises **the *exclusion from meaning-making processes in education* or the lack of a *connection with* education**" (Vandekinderena et. al, 2018: 1). There is little doubt that this form of exclusion is strongly associated with young people's socio-economic status (Ainsworth and Roscigno 2005), and leads to the perpetuation of those structural inequalities that produce it. Focusing on those at the privileged end of educational inequalities, and examining the association of their formal educational background with social stratification, a study commissioned by the Social Mobility Commission and the Sutton Trust described clearly marked pathways that lead to the securing of highly paid jobs by the British social elite. As the report shows, "graduates from Independent [Private] and Comprehensive [State] schools are approximately equal in number (around two fifths each) [in British elite …], despite the fact that almost nine in every ten students in the general population attend comprehensive [i.e. not selective secondary] schools". The report also reveals that graduates from two of the top UK Universities (Oxford and Cambridge) "make up around a quarter of the elites, compared to less than 1% of the population". Graduates from Russell Group Universities (a group of 24 highly ranked British Universities) "as a whole make up almost half of the elite group, compared to just 6% of the working population" (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019: 17). The under representation of certain social and ethnic groups at these Universities has also been well documented (Boliver, 2016; Jerrim, 2013).

However, as already mentioned, educational exclusion is not only about physical access, but also about connections between people from specific groups, particularly those with formal education, and their options for upward social mobility. This connection is much broader than the deficit in young people's aspirations that policy makers and educationalists refer to when seeking to explain educational exclusion. It is also much more complex, as **it concerns not only the individuals and their social backgrounds, but also the interaction between students as individuals and representatives of particular social groups (and social class) with the educational discourse embedded in the educational experience to which they are exposed.** This is not new knowledge. Wills in the UK (1977) and Brantlinger in the US (1993) are two among the many who have presented schools as sites of class conflict. In these, students are confronted with institutional discourses built to represent knowledge and skills as valued by particular social groups, specifically those who are overrepresented in positions of authority. The conflict - or class struggle - that follows is not overt. In fact, the hegemony of the discourses occupying formal education is such that students typically blame themselves rather than their social circumstances for their lack of academic success (Brantlinger, 1993). **Access to education and educational exclusion on the grounds of social deprivation and class could,**

therefore, be examined in the context of social class conflict, or as a case of (in)compatibility within social discourses. Additionally, it can be viewed as a process that concerns not only (formal) education, but everything (formal) education represents in terms of hegemony and class domination. "These are problems that have been recognised before, such as for instance by Bourdieu and Passeron in La Reproduction from 1970, and they continue to form a major obstacle for the education of dominated groups" (Beach et al., 2019: 65). Although our focus thus far has been on poverty and social class, a view of educational exclusion, as a discursive manifestation of social inequalities and domination, reveals that the issue concerns dominant groups equally, regardless of whether they are defined in terms of class, ethnicity, location, gender, etc.

Inequalities: The Role of Citizenship Education
Against the backdrop of the above discussion, the focus of the conference on how citizenship education might address social inequalities needs to be examined firstly in a context that extends beyond the subject of education. This awareness corresponds to NECE's understanding of Citizenship Education, i.e. as unrestricted to specific curricula or subjects, but as encompassing various forms of education[3]. Such an examination will uncover and reinstate certain fundamental and intertwined questions. Some of these concern the traditional debate between the functionalist and Marxist (and neo-Marxist) views of education, and the role of education as either a central mechanism in the process of reproduction of social inequalities, or as an opportunity for change. Others point to debates about the potential of education to compensate for society (Bernstein, 1970), and particularly to all the deficits affecting the lives of children from "low social class whose *material* circumstances are inadequate" (Bernstein, 1970:344, emphasis in original) and who, through education, are exposed to specific areas that are largely incompatible with their background "social assumptions underlying the organisation, distribution and evaluation of knowledge" (ibid: 347). The fact that these debates were initiated a generation ago does not make them less pertinent today, and the questions that they bring up are still largely hidden from everyday practice (see for example: Thompson et al., 2016).

To consider these questions from the viewpoint of the conference, i.e. that of citizenship education as a process that "should strive to politically socialize communities and individuals and encourage critical democratic ideas and practices",[4] requires that our attention move beyond the debate about the role of education in alleviating or reproducing inequalities. Our attention needs to be directed towards social and political ideas, viewpoints, and attitudes that are associated with growing up in particular material circumstances (inadequate or affluent), i.e. living in privileged or disadvantaged conditions under hegemonic or dominant social frameworks. The

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[3] See NECE Mission Statement: http://www.nece-conference.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NECE-Mission-Statement.pdf
[4] As above.

question is not then about whether education can compensate for society in general, but whether it **can "compensate for inequalities in citizenship knowledge, skills and attitudes, […] [whether it] can broaden horizons for those who have less positive experiences of politics and democracy"** (Nieuwelink et al., 2019: 276). Relevant studies offer a mildly pessimistic response to this. Mildly because there are exceptions, but overall pessimistic, as they generally demonstrate that "school tends to reproduce or even exacerbate differences among students from different educational tracks" (Nieuwelink et al., 2019: 287). Commenting on the relevance of their study findings, Nieuwelink et al. indicate that "this is an important outcome when taking into consideration […] that adolescents' attitudes towards politics and democracy are influenced by experiences in daily life and have been shown to have a lasting effect" (ibid).

The association between social inequalities, political attitudes and the role of the school, when examined against the backdrop of the more general discussion about the role of education, **raises questions about appropriate content and methodologies for citizenship education, as a way to engage the disengaged and the capacity of formal education to accommodate such methodologies** (Kakos, 2012). Even before that, it poses **ethical and political questions about the right and appropriateness of education to first identify, and then compensate for, 'democratic' or 'citizenship deficits'** (Kakos, Mueller-Hofstede & Ross, 2016).

Citizenship Education, inequalities and social cohesion

Another important dimension of the above, and one with equally significant political, social, educational and ethical implications, concerns **the role of education in building strong social connections within societies, despite all the social inequalities, including inequalities in education**. This point questions the **potential of education to disrupt the bubble of class isolation** (Thal, 2017) **and to improve social cohesion**. Considering the extent and impact of social inequalities, the efforts of some educational systems[5] to build social cohesion in response to particular sets of values, loosely or closely, overtly or covertly, forcibly or naturally, as associated with nationhood, seem to be at best off-target. Moreover, the choice of Citizenship education as a vehicle for this is educationally, politically and ethically questionable. Besides, the effectiveness of education as a means to heal social divisions in the name of nationhood is, at best uncertain, and in some cases rather dangerous, as it is predicated on suggestions and presuppositions that are uncomfortably close to nationalistic and deeply divisive positions and views. These are important issues for any educational system. For the UK, "an increasingly divided nation" (Sutton Trust & Social Mobility Commission, 2019:4), finding answers to these questions is urgent: "2016's vote to leave the European Union both reflected and accentuated deep social divisions across the country. Britain's 'elite' is higher in the national consciousness than ever, with strained trust between significant sections of the population and those

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[5] Including the English. This is less of an issue (at least not overtly) in the Scottish Citizenship Education curriculum, which focuses on Global Citizenship. (See: Beauvallet, 2016).

at the highest levels of politics, business and the media. Social mobility across the UK is low and not improving, depriving large parts of the country of opportunity, and contributing to this sense of distance" (ibid).

Whether citizenship education can and should do something to address these divisions is a key question. Although it is important to recognise that education may play a role in the process that leads to and sustains inequalities, the key factor associated with these inequalities and divisions applies elsewhere. However, it could be argued that **education can provide the context in which the reasons for these inequalities can be studied, debated and comprehended, and where plans and actions to alleviate inequalities could potentially be conceived of**. This, in fact, may be an appropriate role for citizenship education, and could lead to another question about **whether the implementation of these plans and social activism could also afford contribute significantly to the subject**.

The conditions in which the questions above are being posed might offer educators an opportunity to refresh their thinking and re-examine the role, position and the objectives and content of the subject. Promoting democratic attitudes and student voice has been and remains essential, but doing so may be insufficient, as an educational objective, when the goal is ultimately the disruption of the perpetuation and growth of inequality. **The NECE conference proposes, and is aimed at creating opportunities to discuss whether the methods and content of citizenship education should aim to equip students with the political knowledge and the analytical power that allows deep examination of the roots of social inequalities and of social stratification.** Such educational programmes could also support the development of young citizens' judgment, giving them meaningful content to voice, feeding democratic debate, and allowing the type of political participation that leads to social change. However, such forms of citizenship education might also require the support of the public, and trust that educators will use appropriate methods to engage students in debates and attempt in-depth analyses of inequalities and social divisions. **Whether societies are prepared to show this trust and demand such a role from educators and education is a crucial question that NECE will be exploring in October 2019 in Glasgow.**

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