



Inequalities and Education – A Conceptual Note

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(A longer version can be accessed here: http://www.nece-conference.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/NECE2019_ConceptualNote_long.pdf)

Understanding Educational Exclusion

The relationship between education and social inequalities has been debated and explored extensively in educational research and is always present in educational policy and practice developments. Plethora of classic studies conducted in the 1960s and 70s describe the complex nature of this relationship, often describing formal education as sites of class conflict and associating it with the reproduction of inequalities.

The attention to this relationship has been growing again, together with the social inequalities especially the post 2008 financial crisis.

Glasgow is no stranger to inequalities. The term, the ‘Glasgow effect’ has been coined to describe the vast discrepancies in life conditions in the city, resulting in staggering inconsistencies in life expectancy and health among different areas of the city.

We understand inequalities not only in relation to money and income. “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” (Joyce & Xu, 2019: 4)

The type of inequality that the conference is mostly interested in concerns the educational experiences among different groups of young people.

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, and leads to the perpetuation of those structural inequalities that produce it.

In terms of the (dis)connection of people from specific groups with education, the issue 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.





The Possibilities of Citizenship Education: Key Questions

The focus of the conference on the possibilities for citizenship education to tackle social inequalities is based on a broad understanding of the subject, unrestricted from specific curricula or subjects but as encompassing various forms of education¹. Such an examination uncovers and reinstates some fundamental and largely intertwined questions, including the traditional debates about the role of education as either a central mechanism in the process of reproduction of social inequalities or as an opportunity for change and the question about the potential of education to compensate for society (Bernstein, 1970).

In terms of citizenship education, the question is not only 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).

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. 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).

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. 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.

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

¹ See NECE Mission Statement: <http://www.nece-conference.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/NECE-Mission-Statement.pdf>





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 may offer the opportunity to educators to refresh our thinking and to re-examine the role, the position but also the objectives and content of the subject. Together with imagining this new subject, a key question that we should engage with is whether there is sufficient support from public, policy makers and the educational community to allow educators to assume such roles.

References

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