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# Editorial:
# From Social Justice to Educational Justice: Challenging Practice, and Finding Hope

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## Introduction

The purpose of this special Issue is to explore, expose and energise issues around the concepts of social justice and education. We recognise that the notion of 'social justice' is not static and is not shaped in a vacuum; it is iterative by nature, and flows across generations and contexts. The multiple historical and ideological perspectives that arise from this flow include education theory, research, and practice. These positionings offer deep insights into the purpose of education; they also raise important questions: are the social and ideological dynamics a force for challenging the status quo, and for rupturing cycles of inequity or perpetuating inequality? Do they interrupt the relations of dominance and subordination?

Neoliberal structures and drivers of a neoliberal agenda are grounded in logics of globalisation, marketisation, and individualisation; these often deficit and reductive engines fuel many areas of education. Critical education ideology recognises and addresses diversity and difference; it has the potential to power, and meaningfully critique, frameworks for conceptualising social justice in the context of policy, research and practice, whilst also recognising and challenging the ideological battle between neoliberalism and critical social justice.

We recognise the positive impact of education and its ripple effect that produces broader social benefits (Smith and Duckworth, 2022). Our aim is here to begin to explore, understand and generate frameworks for more equitable systems that bring about positive social change, social justice and democracy.

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Social justice is everywhere. From mainstream political thinking to the most local of grassroots movements, everybody, it seems, is advocating for social justice, and wants their thinking, or their work, to be seen to enact its principles, and espouse its practices. There is very little to argue with if we understand social justice as being centrally concerned with the fair distribution of opportunities and privileges for individuals and communities within society. In this sense, social justice both as a concept, and a complex and shifting set of resulting practices, is understood across the broadest of socio-political contexts. This is undoubtedly a good thing. It is

 

difficult to imagine areas of our political lives (understood in the sense of living together in the *polis*) where social justice is not relevant. In economics, issues of social justice most obviously speak to our discussions, and our decision-making, about fiscal policy, distribution of wealth, taxation systems, and the regulation of our financial services. As we write this introduction, the world is in the grip of a cost-of-living crisis, and we have been thrown back onto thinking about issues of social justice as governments navigate how to stabilise economies, curb rapidly escalating rates of inflation, and demands for wage increases, while at the same time supporting those in the most precarious of financial circumstances.

As we negotiate the complexities of living together well in the 21st century, and think through what this means for our communities, we are forced to return to think through issues of social justice as we grapple with how to deal justly and fairly with a wide range of complex, and often interconnected social issues. These include access to high quality education, to affordable housing, to decent healthcare and dental services at the point of need, and to legal aid for those caught up in the criminal justice system. Social justice is rightly never far from the conversation when we talk about how to address some of the most profoundly inexorable structural inequalities in our society to do with race, sex, age, and gender. It is also at the heart of our conversations about how to deal with complex global issues such as migration caused by war, famine, drought, and deeply ingrained poverty and economic disadvantage. And as a global community, we are waking up to what it will take to tackle not only the existential threat to our planet caused by the climate emergency, but also to what will constitute a socially just response for communities most deeply affected by the accelerating changes to the environment. Perhaps we have never been more acutely aware not only of these problems, but of how they are in many senses they are ineluctably related, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which brought many of these issues into acutely sharp focus.

Given this background, much of which is deeply troubling, we might expect that a concern for social justice would be front and centre in terms of driving policy at national and international levels, and in the implementation of practices at a local level. But there is a sense that the way in 'social justice', as a fecund, richly conceived idea, replete with meaning and implication, has been coined by different bodies for instrumental purposes, who, keen to be seen to be 'doing' social justice (in the sense of merely 'ticking it off' by reference to it) have stripped it of much of its import. But this is not an account of hopelessness, one that sees social justice as essentially devoid of meaning in our contemporary society. In this Special Edition, we look to find again hope in the concept of social justice. We re-imagine it for our world, not by making grand claims about the establishment of a fair and just society which will encourage democratic principles of equality of opportunity and mobility (though these are laudable aims with which we would not disagree), but by seeking to think through the implications of how social justice in, and for, education could be enacted and realised in contemporary educational settings.

There is something important here that speaks to the plethora of ways in which we have, historically, tried to tie social justice down, explain it, reify it, understand sought understand it so that it can be implemented, sorted, 'done' (and by implication, done away with). In his article 'Social justice: History, Purpose and Meaning', Allan Ornstein identifies 30 basic principles that should be considered as a framework for defining social justice (Ornstein, 2017). Yet he acknowledges something that is centrally important to our understanding of what social justice might mean to new generations when he writes:

> Every generation going forward is obligated to interpret and reinterpret the principles of human rights and justice. Every person in a free society must learn the government's obligations to its people and the peoples' obligation to their fellow citizens and humanity in general. That said, the meaning you find in the…30 principles of justice depends on your own sense of history and life experiences. The list is not permanent and should involve the society changes (2017, p. 548).

This special issue is an attempt at doing just that: it repositions and reimagines social justice centrally in relation to a number of educational issues and contexts, with a view to thinking about its implications for a new, post-pandemic global community. But our aim here is to do this not by engaging primarily with the idea of *social* justice. As Ornstein's work is shown, this is a hugely broad and contested area, where even a superficial summary of the issues of concern leads to a framework for defining justice which runs to 30 entries. We cannot hope to do justice (no pun intended) to this notion in this Introduction, or even through the presentation of a number of related papers in this Special Edition. Rather, we hope to make three distinct, but related, contributions to the (vast) existing literature in the field. First, we propose an idea of *educational* justice, and flesh out what we understand by this; second, we show how educational justice is a means of effecting social justice more broadly, and third, we suggest tentative ways forward that, though small in scale, have the potential for cumulative effect and impact across a range of educational contexts.

### *(i) Towards educational justice*

Much of the discussion in the academic and professional literature in the broad field of social justice looks at how it might be achieved in the context of education. This tends to be concerned with structural changes that would be needed to ensure that, in a just society, all children and young people are equally valued, and have equal opportunity to high quality education, and thus equal chances for success. These kinds of discussion are often rooted in a position that sees social justice as a moral imperative (Hemphill, 2015). Work of this kind privileges the idea of social justice, and then considers how it is applied (or perhaps, realised) in a specific context (for example, education, health care, housing, transport etc). Social justice is generally agreed to relate (at least in education) to issues of equity in access, and resource distribution, to the academic and social outcomes of students, and to celebrating diversity and ensuring inclusion (Wang, 2015). Sharon Gerwitz, in documenting the breadth of writing that conceptualizes social justice in education, surmises that there are two major dimensions of concern: the distributional and the relational (Gerwitz, 1998). This seems to reflect the celebrated conception of social justice as defined by John Rawls: 'The subject matter of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major social institutions... distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the distribution of advantages from social co-operation' (Rawls, 1972, p. 7). Such understandings are – necessarily – extremely broad, and we would argue that there is a potential danger here: that in *applying* the concept of social justice to education, we are at risk of becoming blinkered, to what we might expect to see through focussing on dominant, and well-established understandings of what constitutes social justice in any context. In resisting this, we propose and idea of *educational* justice. What this achieves is putting the educational front and centre. It means starting from the educational rough ground, and working, almost as one does in grounded theory, towards a theory of educational justice.

### *(ii) Educational justice as a means of effecting social justice*

There is a very strong discourse embedded in much educational policy-making that takes the view that education is central to achieving social justice in our communities and for society. The message is very clear: supporting children and young people to reach their full potential is a key mechanism by which to achieve social mobility. Education is therefore placed centrally in terms of plans for realising social justice. Take, for example, the (2017) Department for Education paper, *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential* (DfE, 2017). Few would argue with the vision as articulated by the then Secretary of State of Education, and Minister the Women and Equalities, Justine Greening, when she said in the Foreword to the paper: 'No one should be held back because of who they are or where they are born. This plan provides a framework for action that can empower anyone – educators, government, business or civil society – to help transform equality of opportunity in this country' (p. 5). But the message in such statements is an arguably narrow one: schools must

raise their performance, narrow achievement gaps, and make sure that no pupil is left behind. This is the same strong message as in the (2022) Schools' Bill which promises reforms to education to help every child fulfil his or her potential, and to raise standards and improve the quality of schools (a commitment that successive governments have made). Pupils, for their part, have to achieve well, because in doing so, they forge for themselves a way out (of the trap of social injustice in which they find themselves). But there is a risk here that in putting education to the service of social justice, we see it merely as an instrument to effect this particular end.

In positing an idea of *educational* justice, we are suggesting a different approach. This is not to say that we are against improving the quality of schools and educational provision, or that we disagree with encouraging children and young people to engage with, get the most out of, their education. It is rather that we find hope in the idea of nurturing forms of educational justice in classrooms and lecture halls. There is much written about the kinds of values that teachers and lecturers should espouse in documents laying out standards of professional behaviour against which (statutory phase) teachers are assessed[1], and those for lecturers in higher education.[2] These are values, though, that, unsurprisingly, tend to underpin governments' policy imperatives (for example, a requirement in the Teachers' Standards not to undermine fundamental British values), and make scant reference to issues of educational or social justice. Throughout this Special Issue, our contributors outline ways in which they have effectively challenged, and addressed, educational injustices at the local level. They show how these kinds of approaches not only exemplify hopeful spaces for *educational* justice, but also open possibilities for the realisation of social justice more broadly.

*(iii) Ways forward for educational justice*

It is easy to feel a sense of hopelessness in the face of multiple and complex issues of social *in*justice facing society. We are bombarded, almost on a daily basis in the media, with stories about how individuals, and whole communities, are facing the most difficult and tragic of circumstances because of systematic and pernicious deprivation. It then becomes easy to imagine that the only way out of such circumstances is large-scale structural change that would necessitate tectonic shifts in politics, society, and culture, all underpinned by radical economics. Even if we think this might be possible, we are soon likely to reach the conclusion that such change, however necessary, and justifiable, to achieve a more just and equitable society, is largely impracticable.

At the macro level, and in the context of decades of (largely) failed attempts to address sustained social injustices across whole communities and sectors, it is easy to lose hope. But in this Special Edition, we trace how educators and pupils are working to find hope through imagining, and practising, moments of *educational* justice. These moments have not come about as a result of changes at the macro level, but rather through a commitment to changes at the micro level. These changes relate, for example, to the way in which the teacher sees her role; to the ways in which she teaches, and to the examples she uses; to the questions she asks and the ways in which she communicates; to the relationships she has with her learners, and those she expects her pupils to have with each other; to the behaviour she models, expects of her pupils, and how she resolves conflict. These might well be subtle changes, but ones that, cumulatively, have a positive effect. Just as challenging micro aggressions in different contexts can lead to larger scale cultural change (Harrison and Tanner, 2018), so we argue that embracing micro

[1] See Part 2 of the Teachers' Standards on Personal and Professional Conduct (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1040274/Teachers__Standards_Dec_2021.pdf)

[2] See Professional Values V1 – V4 in the (2011) UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education (https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/UK%20Professional%20Standards%20Framework_1570613241.pdf)

changes in the classroom (or the lecture hall or seminar room) can effect forms of educational justice.

In Jan McArthur's think piece for this issue, the importance of having a clear, and collective sense of what is meant by social justice is addressed with a cautionary reluctance to tying down the concept to an exact definition. Rather, McArthur argues, broad understandings, and an appreciation of a range of conceptualisations of the term – even those that may be contentious – are necessary. McArthur invites the reader to enter into a conversation with her ideas for social justice, and to adopt a more open and forgiving approach to the concept, one that rests at the heart of education. Daniel Van Dijk, in his book review of Jacques Rancière's celebrated volume, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), also disrupts our common understandings of social justice, preferring to talk of emancipation. As van Dijk writes: 'For Rancière, social justice does not refer to a state of social equilibrium, but is rather to be found in the dissent or disagreement with existing social orders. He maintains that a social order, much like a lesson, starts off from an assumption of inequality. To dissent is to perceive and to feel differently than one is (explicitly or implicitly) ordered to do. To dissent is the essence of politics and of the demand for social justice'.

We would want to adopt a reticence, similar to that of McArthur's, in tying down too firmly the idea of *educational* justice. Justice is related, etymologically, to the idea of 'right order'.[3] Educational justice, then, is related – at least in some senses – to getting things in the right order. This is suggestive of a relationship to what education chooses to prioritise. National governments, of course, have a particular view of educational priorities; as we have seen, these are very explicitly related to improving the quality of schools, and the educational attainment (and we see this in other educational sectors, particularly higher education, with the introduction of the sector's regulator, the Office for Students, and their focus on the quality of teaching and learning for students as 'customers', and of graduate outcomes and employability). But educational justice may mean profoundly questioning, and even disrupting, such priorities. It means being open to making what might appear to be, on their own, insignificant changes, but which are powerful in disrupting established orders, and so effect forms of educational justice. We see the call for such disruption across the contributions to this Special Edition: from the way that professionals need to be consulted on policy change, to the way that playful pedagogies resist formalised learning in early years education. These are accounts of resistance, and ones of hope.

## Policy themes

Across the contributions that we invited for this special issue, we find a number of key themes. One is in relation to policy, and in particular, how education professionals can seek to challenge practice to effect social justice, find hope, and ways forward for social justice in our educational institutions, and for children, young people and families.

Derek Barter offers a critique of the current formal education system in which he argues that the value of learning is geared towards increasingly limited instrumentalist ends. He considers an alternative starting point for a socially just education, and in doing so, reflects on two existing programmes offered by Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education. Here, he explores how participation, dialogue, reflection, and a willingness to engage, can offer a hopeful alternative to instrumental ends, one that works towards an emancipatory and just education system.

Glenn Millington investigates the implementation of educational policy in a deprived area of north-west England, and explores the social justice implications of how this was done. He reflects on the experiences of professionals in education, health and social care who reported feeling excluded from the decision-making process. Millington goes on to draw attention to questions central to the planning and implementation of policy aimed at inclusive practice, and social justice, in which he questions whether it is justified to exclude the voices of professionals who are directly impacted by a policy.

[3] See https://www.etymonline.com/word/justice

Trace Ollis' paper traces the recent policy history of the adult education system in Australia in which no single cohesive programme design or curriculum exists for adult learning. She proposes a comprehensive framework for the delivery of pre-accredited training in Australia drawing on the work of Nussbaum and her Capability Framework. For Ollis, a socially just education would be one with access to a critical and democratic curriculum; equity and access to resources; consideration of learners' prior experiences, and existing knowledge and skills.

## Rights themes

Social justice is ineluctably related to issues of rights. In this Special Edition, a number of our contributors address the issue of children and young people's rights. Clive Hedges, Ewan Ingleby, and Mervyn Martin offer an examination central to the origins of rights' discourse, and contemporary debates around child labour in developing countries. In their paper they reflect on the problems with the discursive uses that children's rights are put to, and its weakness as a means of addressing issues of social justice. They argue that, for children's rights campaigns go beyond reinforcing existing global systems of domination and subordination, there is the need for a radical rethinking of, and a focus on, children's place in a nexus of social relations. It is here where they see a starting place for conceptions of social justice to pay adequate attention to the needs of childhood.

Jo Albin-Clark and Nathan Archer outline how play is marginalised in early years classrooms settings and is positioned as a privilege as opposed to a right. They go on to re-position play as democratic, equitable, and a socially just approach to teaching, where they see an opening for resistance to shift play beyond a privilege. They argue that playful pedagogies have the potential to act as hopeful storytellings of social justice as serious play. Theirs is an account of challenging practice and finding hope.

## Challenging practice; finding hope

A trope running through all the contributions in this Special Edition is that of community. The Issue tells the stories, in different ways, of communities of children, of adult learners, of school leaders, and of teachers and teacher educators. These communities are not simply the passive recipients of policy initiatives, but active initiators of change, be that related to policy, practice or pedagogy. They are also active agents in terms of effecting social justice through initiating different forms of educational justice.

Social justice, as Jan McArthur's Think Piece in this Issue outlines, has a long, and complex history. While the contemporary landscape of educational policy and practice might give us much with about we should be rightly concerned, we want to thank all our contributors for opening up ways of thinking that find hope for a more educationally just, and so more socially just, world.

## Disclosure statement

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## Open Access Policy

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