

Ideas of Social Justice in education: Devising an Analytical Framework

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Proposal information

Education has to be socially just. This injunction is present in every education system, at every stage of its development. Who would argue for a socially unjust education? However, researching e.g. the press, we can find different positions towards social justice in education. The difference is not that some people argue for justice and other for injustice, but rather that their ideas of social justice in education differ.

There are many works about ideas of social justice in education, among which some former work of the two authors of this contribution (Friant, 2012, 2013; Friant, Demeuse, & Laloua, 2008; Sanchez Santamaría, 2014; Sánchez Santamaría & Manzanares Moya, 2014; Sánchez-Santamaría & Espinoza, 2015; Sánchez-Santamaría & Vila, 2016) but also a series of other work on which each of the authors has leaned upon, be them specifically applied on education (Baye et al., 2005; Baye & Demeuse, 2008; Bolívar, 2005; Demeuse & Baye, 2005, 2007, 2008; Espinoza, 2007; Herrera, 2007; Matoul et al., 2005a, 2005b, Meuret, 1999, 2000) or works of moral philosophy aiming at devising theories of justice (Miller & Walzer, 1995; Rawls, 1999; Sen, 2000; Walzer, 1983).

The abundance of these works shows how much this is a crucial question, important as much for the scientific community as for the society in its entirety. Why be interested to such an extent in ideas of social justice in education? Why formalize them? A sequential vision would say that it's all about defining what is a socially just education system in order to organize one's system to closely match this definition of social justice. This vision however forgets the history of education systems, their evolution, their legacy. As several authors have shown (Demeuse & Baye, 2005; Rochex, 2008; Sánchez Santamaría & Manzanares Moya, 2014), there are historical trends in social justice models in education systems: the dominant idea evolves from a period to another, each education system resulting in an overlapping of different ideas of justice.

We therefore think that formalizing ideas of social justice in education is also done a posteriori, after that some intuitive arguments have been formulated. These intuitive arguments could be, e.g compensation or merit: we have to « give more to those who have less » or « reward those who merit » because intuitively, we have the feeling that it is the right thing to do. A posteriori, stakeholders of education systems present their arguments about the intuitive position they have adopted in the first time.

Developing analytical frameworks enabling researchers to identify ideas of social justice in education has a strong heuristic interest. A good analytical framework could be used to analyse discourses about an education system, to compare education systems with each other, or to make diachronic comparisons of the same system. It could enable researchers to show that in a certain education system, an evolution is going on from one idea of justice to another one, and thus to deduce probable

consequences; or that an educational policy is criticized in the name of a certain idea of social justice in education. In order to do so, researchers and stakeholders at the level of education systems need some analytical framework enabling them to precisely draw ideas of social justice from discourses about education. But the existing analytical frameworks could still be improved. Improving them and devising a more satisfying analytical framework is the aim of our contribution.

Sources used

This work is the result of the collaboration between two authors from different European countries, with different backgrounds and epistemological traditions.

In order to devise our analytical framework, we mainly lean upon three former frameworks: Demeuse & Baye (2005), Bolivar (2005) and Espinoza (2007). These frameworks are very useful, because they « flatten » the ideas of justice into a limited number of dimensions. We furthermore add the concepts of meritocratic equality of opportunity (Le Clainche, 1999; Dubet, 2004) and unconditional respect (Dubet, 1999; Loubris, 2016).

According to the model of Demeuse & Baye (2005), different ideas of social justice in education differ according to only one dimension: the level of equality that we aim to reach. This model is made up of five levels: equality of access, equality of treatment, equality of attainment and equality of social realization. This model, however, does not encompass the idea of equality of opportunity (Le Clainche, 1999; Dubet, 2004) that has gained major attention in education.

The model of Bolivar (2005), whereas very similar, could be used to improve the model of Demeuse & Baye (2005) because it does include the idea of equality of opportunity. However, Bolivar's definition of equality of opportunity (making sure that every potential barrier to access has been removed) is not the same as the one we borrowed from Dubet (2004) (« model of justice allowing everyone to take part in the same competition without that inequalities of wealth, fortune and birth directly determine his/her chances of success and access to relatively rare educational qualifications » – our translation), which leaves us with some difficulties. Bolivar (2005) identifies four levels of equality: equality of opportunity, equality of teaching, equality of knowledge and attainment, and equality of (individual or social) outcome.

Finally, the model of Espinoza (2007) is the most complete, because whereas it reduces the number of dimensions, it takes into account not only one dimension such as the other models, but two.

The first dimension is comparable to the other models, answering the question of « equality of what? » with five levels: resources, access, survival, output, and outcome. The second one distinguishes equality (we propose to call it « unconditional equality ») and equity (we propose to call it « conditional equality »). Unconditional equality is subdivided into equality of opportunity, equality for all and equality on average across social groups. Conditional equality is subdivided into equality according to needs, to potential, and to achievement.

Conclusions and Findings

The problem with the model of Espinoza (2007) is the absence of independence of its dimensions. What differentiates equality of opportunity in access and equality of access according to potential? The model we are devising must simplify Espinoza's model in order to have independent dimensions.

As for the second dimension, we propose to place equality of opportunity in conditional equality. This matches the level of « equality according to potential » of Espinoza's model. In order to perfectly match a definition of equality of opportunity given by Le Clainche (1999), we propose to name this « conditional equality according to internal resources under control ».

We also propose to drop conditional equality according to needs because, as our model is based on the notion of levels of equality that are aimed at, it is redundant with the notion of aim. For example, conditional equality of treatment according to needs means that pupils should be treated differently in order to reach some level of attainment, which is equal to pursuing equality of attainment.

As for the first dimension, we add one level that is very often found in the discourses of individuals about social justice in education: the principle of unconditional respect. This principle is described by Dubet (1999) as one of the principles of justice (with equality and merit) used by pupils when they talk about justice at school. It means that educational judgements must never attain the pupil's dignity as a person. Loubris (2016) has shown that this dimension is very often cited by teachers as a condition for education to be fair. The other levels are: external resources prior to access, access, treatment, survival, attainment, outcome (external realization).

We plan to test our analytical framework using already collected 15-minutes interviews with nine French-speaking Belgian educational stakeholders (politicians, heads of trade unions...).

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