

Key Issues in Education and Social Justice

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Key Issues in Education and Social Justice

2nd Edition

Emma Smith



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Educational Excellence Everywhere, Department for
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NEW TO THIS SECOND EDITION

There are three new chapters in this second edition that explore childhood inequalities (Chapter 3), international issues in education and social justice (Chapter 4) and educational inequalities, specifically in the USA (Chapter 7). Existing chapters have been fully updated to reflect recent developments in education and related social issues, including many new tables and figures analysing very recent educational and demographic data. In particular, Chapter 2 has been expanded to include more coverage of wider social inequalities, especially in relation to income and wealth, and Chapter 8 has been extended to include how young people experience social justice and the experiences of young offenders.

1

AN INTRODUCTION TO EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Education is the greatest liberator mankind has ever known and the greatest force for social progress.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, October 2007

The public understands the primary importance of education as the foundation for a satisfying life, an enlightened and civil society, a strong economy, and a secure Nation.

NCEE 1983

The role of education in promoting equality and social justice is a major preoccupation of the politicians who play a central role in deciding what is taught in our schools, where it is taught, to whom and by whom. From James Callaghan's speech at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1976 to the current government's commitment to education as the engine of social mobility and economic growth, the purpose of schooling has become increasingly linked to politicians' views of what constitutes a fair and just society. This chapter introduces some of these politicised views of social justice and considers how they inform our understanding of what a fair and equitable school system might look like. It also examines what we mean by the term 'social justice' and focuses on three basic principles of justice: fairness as defined by treating individuals according to merit, by treating them according to need and by treating everyone equally.

The Politics of Social Justice

Over the last 40 or so years, different political ideologies have given rise to different notions of how the state should promote social justice through education. The policies that schools experience today, such as school choice,

high-stakes testing and school accountability, have been the result of different political views on how best to achieve a world-class education system. Views about the role that education can play in reducing social inequality have been particularly prominent among policymakers from both the political Left and Right:

Without good education there can be no social justice. (David Cameron 2007)

It is education which provides the rungs on the ladder of social mobility. (Gordon Brown 2010)

Education is the high road out of poverty. (John Major 2015)

As the above quotations illustrate, the role of education in reducing poverty and inequality and promoting social mobility is a favourite topic among politicians seeking to share their vision for a fair and just society. However, while politicians from various parties may agree that education has a key role in promoting social justice, they differ in their views on the best way to achieve it. Here we examine these different political ideologies by focusing on extracts from the speeches of recent and current British political figures. To begin, let us consider this from the former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown:

... fairness can be advanced by but cannot, in the end, be guaranteed by charities, however benevolent, by markets, however dynamic, or by individuals, however well meaning, but guaranteed only by enabling government. (Brown 2005)

Gordon Brown's view is that while charities, individual effort and markets can work to make society become fairer, the main responsibility lies with the government. His argument that 'only the State can guarantee fairness' sits in contrast to that of another former, this time Conservative, Prime Minister, David Cameron. Cameron's view was of a 'Big Society' where power and control are redistributed from the state to individuals and local communities – in other words, a movement 'from state action to social action' (Cameron 2009). In essence, this was the reverse of Gordon Brown's view. For current and recent Conservative-led governments, limiting the role of the state in educational matters is exemplified by the expansion of academies and free schools (both of which are examined more closely in Chapter 6). This new way of organising schooling has meant a lessening of the control that government and local authorities have over how schools are administered and a more prominent role for the private sector. This expanded role of the private

sector in education, both at home and overseas, raises important challenges for critics who argue that it is the state's role to school its citizens and through this function to ensure educational equity (for example, Ball 2007; Ravitch 2013; Unwin and Yandell 2017).

Brown and Cameron's views about the role of the state in enabling social justice reflect fundamental differences in the ideologies of the Conservative and Labour political traditions. Traditionally and simply put, the view of political parties whose ideologies lie to the Left (i.e. Labour) is that the state has an important role to play in ensuring that people's life experiences are fair. Political parties whose ideologies lie further to the Right (i.e. Conservative) argue that individual rights and responsibilities, rather than the state, are paramount. A fuller discussion of the historical and philosophical roots of these ideologies is beyond the scope of this book but Box 1.1 provides an example of how these political perspectives relate to issues of poverty and education.

Box 1.1: The relationship between poverty and education – differing political views

The view from the Left is that the inferior educational experiences of the poor hold them back and prevent them from competing with better educated groups. Therefore the poor are forced into low-waged and menial work and social mobility is stalled.

The view from the Right is that the poor are poor because they failed to work hard and take advantage of educational opportunities. It is their individual responsibility to take hold of the opportunities that are available and so prosper.

The moderate view is that the poor are poor because of inadequate education partly because of inferior schools but also because of disrupted families, for example, which prevent them from absorbing the education that is available.

A good illustration of how the two main political parties differ with regard to the role of the state and the individual can be further explored through the views of two relatively recent long-serving Prime Ministers: Tony Blair (Labour, 1997–2007) and Margaret Thatcher (Conservative, 1979–1990). One of the most famous recent examples of a leading political figure challenging the role of the state in ensuring social justice was Margaret Thatcher's 1987 interview to *Woman's Own* magazine (Thatcher 1987). In what became known as the 'Society Speech', Thatcher argued that, rather than relying on the assistance of the state, people should assume responsibility for their own lives:

I think we have gone through a period when too many children and people have been given to understand ‘I have a problem, it is the Government’s job to cope with it!’ ... ‘I am homeless, the Government must house me!’ and so they are casting their problems on society and who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first ... *There is no such thing as society.* There is a living tapestry of men and women and people and the beauty of that tapestry and the quality of our lives will depend upon how much each of us is prepared to take responsibility for ourselves and each of us prepared to turn round and help by our own efforts those who are unfortunate. (Thatcher 1987, emphasis added)

Thatcher’s view of the primacy of individual rights over collective rights (Thatcher 1985) extends to her conception of ‘social justice’, a term she considered to be unclear and imprecise and which corresponded to a ‘doctrine’ that was being promoted by a ‘progressive consensus’ whose view it was that the state should be responsible for promoting equality (Thatcher 1975). Thatcher’s own views were somewhat different. Consider this from a speech she gave to the Institute of Socioeconomic Studies in New York:

... the pursuit of equality itself is a mirage. What’s more desirable and more practicable than the pursuit of equality is the pursuit of equality of opportunity. And opportunity means nothing unless it includes the right to be unequal and the freedom to be different. One of the reasons that we value individuals is not because they’re all the same, but because they’re all different. I believe you have a saying in the Middle West: ‘Don’t cut down the tall poppies. Let them rather grow tall.’ I would say, let our children grow tall and some taller than others if they have the ability in them to do so. (Thatcher 1975)

Margaret Thatcher was quite clear in her view of the diminished role that the state should play in ensuring equality and social (or educational) justice. She emphasised individual rather than state responsibility and while promoting a concept of ‘equality of opportunity’ also defended an individual’s right to be different and, by extension, unequal.

Tony Blair’s New Labour, on the other hand, embraced the term ‘social justice’, explicitly linking it to education:

To those who say, ‘Where is Labour’s passion for social justice?’ I say education is social justice. Education is liberty. Education is opportunity. Education is the key not just to how we as individuals succeed and prosper, but to the future of this country. (Blair 1997)

During the 13 years that Labour was last in office, issues of social justice underpinned many of their social and educational policies. Their record on social justice and the extent to which they have succeeded in making society fairer is explored briefly in Chapters 2 and 3 and in much more detail in two edited collections by John Hills and colleagues (Hills and Stewart 2005; Hills et al. 2009). But it is clear that improving social justice and social mobility were explicit aims of the two most recent Labour governments, as Blair's successor Gordon Brown reiterated:

So instead of, as in the past, developing only some of the potential of some of the people, our mission for liberty for all and fairness to all summons us to develop all of the potential of all the people. (Brown 2005)

In May 2010, David Cameron became the leader of the first Coalition government the country had seen since the Second World War. With office came Cameron's idea for solving the problems of what he called, 'Broken Britain'. His view of a 'Big Society' presented its own conceptualisation of justice and equality:

Of course in a free society, some people will be richer than others. Of course if we make opportunity more equal, some will do better than others. But there's a massive difference between a system that allows fair reward for talent, effort and enterprise and a system that keeps millions of people at the bottom locked out of the success enjoyed by the mainstream ... Instead, we should focus on the causes of poverty as well as the symptoms because that is the best way to reduce it in the long term. And we should focus on *closing the gap between the bottom and the middle*, not because that is the easy thing to do, but because focusing on those who do not have the chance of a good life is the most important thing to do. (Cameron 2009, emphasis added)

For Cameron, the 'Big Society' represented the empowerment of ordinary people to take charge of their lives through strengthening communities and civil society. This might involve enabling parents to start their own schools (see Chapter 6) or encouraging people to undertake more voluntary work or charitable giving. But it also involved 'taking power away from politicians and giving it to people' and, so Cameron argued, enabling society to become fairer (Cameron 2010). By 2015 Cameron's view of a Big Society had evolved into one that was concerned with people's life chances. As Cameron saw it:

We can make Britain a place where a good life is in reach for everyone who is willing to work and do the right thing. (Cameron 2015)

Once again there is an emphasis on personal responsibility and the importance of work – of ‘doing the right thing’. The focus was less on the causes of poverty, such as low wages, but more on the consequences of poverty and in particular a lack of opportunities. In an important 2016 speech on Life Chances, Cameron argued that:

This fixation on welfare – the state writing a cheque to push people’s incomes just above the poverty line – this treated the symptoms, not the causes of poverty; and, over time, it trapped some people in dependency. (Cameron 2016a)

Instead he favoured a free market approach to generating prosperity and raising living standards that enabled more choice and brought competition to public services: the idea that ‘a rising tide will lift all boats’. In doing this, Cameron began to reframe how we understood poverty, he argued that being in poverty was not just about economics (i.e. money) but that there were other very important social consequences of poverty, such as worklessness and drug or alcohol addiction, that could adversely affect one’s opportunities and therefore their life chances. This reframing of poverty and disadvantage as being not just about having little money is an important one because it has affected how the government thinks we should measure poverty, and in particular child poverty, in Britain today. There is more on this in Chapter 3.

By the summer of 2016, Britain had a new Conservative Prime Minister – Theresa May – and David Cameron’s strategy for improving life chances was replaced by a new vision for Britain as The Great Meritocracy:

I want Britain to be the world’s Great Meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow. (Theresa May 2016)

In presenting her case for reform, Theresa May placed education central to this new meritocratic ideal and in doing so reopened an old debate into that figurehead of selective state schooling – the grammar school. As we shall see in Chapters 6 and 7, her argument in support of grammar schools is one that is frequently made by advocates of school choice:

The debate over selective schools has raged for years. But the only place it has got us to is a place where selection exists if you’re wealthy – if you can afford to go private – but doesn’t exist if you’re not. We are effectively saying to poorer and some of the most disadvantaged children in our country that they can’t have the kind of education their richer counterparts can enjoy.

What is ‘just’ about that? Where is the meritocracy in a system that advantages the privileged few over the many? How can a meritocratic Britain let this situation stand? (Theresa May 2016)

So here we have seen some different political perspectives on the role of the state in ensuring social justice: Thatcherism viewed justice as the primary responsibility of the individual rather than the state and upheld an individual’s right ‘to be unequal and the freedom to be different’. In contrast Tony Blair and Gordon Brown advocated a far greater role for the state in ensuring social justice. Then there is Cameron’s idea of fairness as giving people what they deserve: a ‘fair reward for talent and effort’ and of ‘closing the gap between the bottom and the middle’ (not, you will note, between the bottom and the top). And finally there is Theresa May’s view of Britain as the Great Meritocracy that puts the interests of ‘ordinary’ people first.

You can see above that politicians use different language when they describe issues of social justice: Blair and Thatcher differed in how useful they found the term social justice, for instance. Therefore before we consider what it is that we mean by social justice, especially when we are thinking about educational issues, it is worth spending a little time to examine some of the key terms that policymakers use when discussing the topic.

The Language of Social Justice

Reading through the extracts of political speeches above, you can see that the language of social justice can be very powerful: terms such as social mobility, equal opportunity, meritocracy and life chances are used to underpin a political vision of what constitutes a fair and just society. But what do these terms mean and how useful are they in helping us understand what is meant by social justice and of the role that education can play in making society fairer?

Equality of opportunity

While most politicians may differ in the extent to which they believe that their role is to reduce inequalities in – usually economic – outcomes, almost all agree that the aim of policy should be to create greater equality of opportunity (Hills 2015). For Spring (2017) equality of opportunity means that all citizens are given the same chances to enter any occupation or social class. It does not mean that everyone has equal income or equal status but just that they have the same opportunities to succeed. Having equality of opportunity will therefore lead to people occupying their place in society because of merit rather than inherited wealth, or connections, or particular cultural advantages. This argument accepts that society is unequal and that people

have to compete for social goods. Some will be successful (although how we define success might differ) and others will be less successful. The role of schooling is to provide everyone with an education that will equip them with an equal opportunity to compete in life's race. There are different ways in which schools might provide equality of opportunity so that students with wealth and other social and cultural advantages are not given a head start.

One way to achieve this is to ensure that everyone receives an equal and common schooling: this was arguably the ideal behind the introduction of comprehensive education in England in Wales in the late 1960s, the idea being that children from all social backgrounds attend schools where they receive an education that will put them on an equal footing for the economic competition that lies ahead. When they leave school they will have an equal chance to succeed. One downside to this, of course, is the role of the family and the extent to which they are able to influence their child's education. For example, some parents will read to their children or help them with their homework, others will not. Some parents will enhance their child's educational experiences by paying for extra tuition, or moving to a house near a 'good' school or even by paying for private schooling. Others, of course, cannot.

Another way in which schools might provide equality of opportunity is by trying to overcome, or compensate, for the influence of family. When students from all social backgrounds enter school they are sorted and streamed, to greater or lesser degrees, based on their academic performance. Schools then provide different educational experiences depending on the students' abilities and, sometimes, interests. This might involve splitting students into academic and vocational tracks; it might involve providing additional support for those students who struggle academically; or equally it might involve providing more resources for students who excel academically. The role of the school here is to provide everyone with the equal opportunity to be prepared for life outside the school gates, rather than to provide them with equal treatment when they are *inside* the school gates. But of course this leaves us with the same issue as above – how can schools compensate for the influence of the family? The answer is: with difficulty.

One thing that educationalists do know, and have known for decades, is that the key determinant of academic success is the family. While some students succeed against the odds, for the majority, the family to which you are born will exert a greater influence on your future life chances than the school you attend (e.g. Coleman et al. 1966). So equality of opportunity in education, while a very important principle among those who are interested in issues of social justice, can only take us so far. As the OECD has argued

It has long been popular to say that while there is no social consensus around the desirability of tackling inequality of outcomes, for example

by redistributing wealth, surely we can agree that it is necessary to ensure that we have equality of opportunities – i.e. that all should have the same life chances regardless of their initial conditions. In reality, few societies come close to ensuring such equality of opportunities. (OECD 2015: 27)

Linked to equality of opportunity is the idea of a meritocracy: where social rewards are given out on the basis of merit. The ideal of a meritocracy is favoured by many contemporary politicians but its roots were sunk in a far more cautionary tale.

Meritocracy

In his 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the sociologist Michael Young describes a society where access to schools, universities and industry were ‘progressively thrown open to merit, so that the clever children of each generation had opportunity for ascent’ (Young 1958: 15). This society is governed by a new elite and ruled ‘not so much by the people but as by the cleverest people; not an aristocracy of birth, not a plutocracy of wealth but a true meritocracy of talent’ (1958: 21). In this new, meritocratic, society power lay with those who had been selected by their ability, but gradually, over time, the meritocracy became hereditary as the redistribution of ability within society began to reinforce and replicate the very class divisions it had originally sought to reduce:

... Now that people are classified by ability, the gap between the classes has inevitably become wider. The upper classes are, on the one hand, no longer weakened by self-doubt and self-criticism. Today the eminent know that success is just reward for their own capacity, for their own efforts, and for their own undeniable achievement. They deserve to belong to a superior class. (1958: 106)

But *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was a satire. In coining the term *meritocracy*, Young sought to highlight the self-belief of those who rise to the top and who believe not only that they deserved whatever rewards flowed to them but also that their children would deserve them too. Young’s essay was a cautionary tale but in the years following its publication, the ideal of a meritocracy has been adopted by many politicians, from both the Left and the Right, as a mantra for a more just society. You may recall Theresa May’s speech, mentioned above, in which she called for Britain to be the Great Meritocracy; this was echoed in the text of the Conservative Party Manifesto for the 2017 elections:

The greatest injustice in Britain today is that your life is still largely determined not by your efforts and talents but by where you come from, who your parents are and what schools you attend. This is wrong. We want to make Britain the world's Great Meritocracy: a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow, where advantage is based on merit not privilege. (Conservative Party Manifesto 2017: 49)

For Theresa May's government, a meritocracy in education largely meant grammar schools where the children of the aspirant working classes (as well as most of those from the middle class) would receive a world class education, in successful and innovative schools that would, in turn, provide them with access to the leading universities and onto the professions. We will say more about grammar schools in Chapter 6 but as engines of social mobility, their actuality has proven to be far more mundane than their advocates might suggest – as with Young's meritocracy, grammar schools, and other forms of selective schooling, have done little to provide the elusive equality of opportunity so expected of our educational institutions.

In response to the increased general usage of the term meritocracy, and in particular to Tony Blair's conflation of meritocracy with equality of opportunity, Michael Young wrote in 2001 of his disappointment that the warnings of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* had been left unheeded. He shared his concern that the 'engine of education' has put its 'seal of approval' on a minority of people and its 'seal of disapproval' on those who have failed to shine at an early age. In advising politicians to drop the word meritocracy, Young was remarkably prescient in foreseeing the consequences for those who have been left behind in a society of rising inequality, increasing distance from the governing elites, disengagement, disaffection and a rise in populism as reflected in the election of Donald Trump, and to some extent, by the Brexit vote. These lessons from Young, that we should be wary of the meritocracy and aware of the limits of education in fostering equality of opportunity, might well be remembered as you read the remainder of this book.

Social mobility

Britain has a deep social mobility problem ... for this generation of young people in particular, it is getting worse not better. (Social Mobility Commission 2016: iii)

To be socially mobile suggests that an individual has moved further up the social ladder in comparison to their parents. Or, in other words, social mobility loosens the 'links between the lottery of birth and chances in life' (HM Government 2012a: 3). In a relatively immobile society an individual's education level, occupation or income is very similar to that of their parents.

In a more mobile society these factors would be comparatively higher: for example, an individual may have gained a university degree while their parents left school at 16.

A recent report by the Social Mobility Commission (2016) argues that despite increased levels of employment, the contemporary expectation that each generation would be better off than their parents is no longer being met. For example, those born in the 1980s were the first cohort to be born after the Second World War who did not start their working life with higher incomes than the previous generation. While education has, to some extent, reduced the attainment gap between those from wealthy and poorer families (see Chapter 5) the Social Mobility Commission argues that:

From the early years through to universities, there is an entrenched and unbroken correlation between social class and educational success. Repeated attempts to reform the education system have not produced a big enough social mobility dividend. (2016: iv)

Social mobility as an ideal might seem commendable, but for many researchers it is not without contention. According to Lister (2016), for example, the future-oriented focus of social mobility is of particular concern as it neglects the experience of childhood, viewing it merely as a step towards adulthood rather than an important phase of life in its own right (see Chapter 3). Another issue is that the notion of social mobility focuses on lifting people out of poverty but does not always address the reasons why people might be poor in the first place. In doing this it accepts that rewards are distributed unequally and does nothing to problematise this (Lister 2016). It also assumes that by getting the most able and committed people into certain jobs, these jobs become the most ‘desirable’ and ‘well rewarded’: compare how much society chooses to pay its teachers, compared with its investment bankers, for instance. Being socially mobile also neglects the fact that not everyone will climb the social mobility ladder. What about those who (for whatever reason) cannot or do not wish to climb this ladder – should they also be able to enjoy a flourishing life, free of poverty? Indeed while progression up the ladder may be an important goal, it might not be appropriate for everyone.

Whether social mobility is getting better or worse in Britain is a contentious topic (see, for example, Blanden et al. 2005; Gorard 2008; Crawford et al. 2011). Let us take just one example. In Britain in 2015, nearly three quarters of judges and almost two thirds of ‘top’ doctors were privately educated. Among politicians, nearly a third of MPs were educated in independent schools; for the cabinet it was 50% and for the shadow cabinet (at the time Labour) it was 13%. In the arts, over two thirds of British winners of the main Oscars attended independent schools, as did just under half of British

winner of the main BAFTAs (Sutton Trust 2016, and remember that just 7% of the British population go to private schools). These patterns have hardly changed in decades, despite widening and increased access to university (e.g. Sutton Trust 2010).

This apparent stalling of social mobility is a particularly potent political topic and is often attributed to the decline of the grammar school (see Theresa May's speech on the meritocratic value of the grammar school, for example). The argument that is often presented is that the grammar school system which selected by ability (and therefore allowed the bright children of the poor to access a 'quality' education) had been replaced by comprehensive schools and an expanding selective system which selected according to wealth and so enhanced the educational divide between the rich and the poor. The consequences of this, we are told, are apparent several decades later in the composition of our most distinguished professions (see above). However, research tells us that the move away from grammar schools towards a comprehensive system of schooling has had no impact on social mobility and that 'comprehensive schools were as good for mobility as the selective schools they replaced' (Boliver and Swift 2011: 89). We say more on this in Chapter 6 but, as you can see from this example, the relationship with education and social mobility is presumed to be very important. Education is, almost by definition, viewed as the conduit through which one becomes socially mobile – usually through acquiring a 'good' education and progression to university. However, as we shall see in this book, education in fact plays a limited role in ensuring social mobility.

Closely linked to issues of social mobility, at least in the mind of many politicians, are those of life chances. In an important speech in January 2016, then Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to transform life chances through 'applying a more sophisticated and deeper understanding of what disadvantage means in Britain today'. In criticism of Cameron's focus on life chances Lister (2016) writes that interventions to overcome the effects of being born into disadvantage do little to change the patterns of disadvantage that create the unequal starting points in the first place; in other words these are further efforts to treat the symptoms of poverty without addressing its causes. They do little more than try to encourage disadvantaged children to climb the ladder of opportunity while the ladder itself is left the same:

... an individual's life chances are shaped not just by their own characteristics, efforts and attitudes but by the structure of the ladder itself: its height, its gradient and the size of the gaps between the rungs. (2016: 4)

In further criticism of the language of social justice, John Hills argues that the ideals of equality of opportunity, of meritocracy and of social mobility rest on the assumption that ‘the scale of the differences in rewards for those who end up at the top and bottom of a meritocratic society is of no further concern’ (2015: 213). In other words they pay no attention to the inequalities that are inherent in a society that rewards some people to the exclusion of others.

So far in this chapter, we have read about how politicians conceive of ‘social justice’ and ‘fairness’ as central to reducing inequalities and making society fairer. But how do we decide what is fair and what is unfair? Despite differing political views of the extent to which the state should or should not enable social justice, the notion of a fair society where opportunities are more equal is central to contemporary political policy and debate from politicians on both the Left and the Right. Therefore an understanding of social justice, and by implication of educational justice, is crucial in order to appreciate the ways in which education and schooling might work to reduce society’s inequalities. It is to these different principles of social justice that we now turn.

What do we Mean by Social Justice?

Before considering how educational inequalities manifest themselves and the extent to which schools can reduce these inequalities and promote educational justice, it is worth pausing to think about what it is that we mean by social justice and equality in the first place. As you read earlier, this is not necessarily straightforward and is an issue that has preoccupied philosophers since the time of Aristotle and Plato. What follows is a very basic introduction – further reading and resources are given at the end of the chapter.

Consider the following definition of justice:

Justice is the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due.
(Miller – quoting Roman Emperor Justinian – 2003: 76)

This ideal of treating others according to what they are due or entitled to implies that people have different needs and therefore ought to be treated differently. So the hungry or the sick ought to be given more resources than those who are healthy or better off. Sometimes this can be straightforward. Often, however, it is not and the difficulty we often have is in deciding who deserves what, when.

Miller (2003) and Garner et al. (2009) provide us with three concepts to help us decide this:

- First, the way we treat people has to be consistent, so if students behave in similar ways then any punishments or rewards have to be applied in the same way.
- Second, this treatment has to be relevant, so we might not reward or punish an individual because their name begins with a certain letter of the alphabet, for example.
- Finally, it has to be proportionate, so if we have to treat people differently that treatment ought to be in proportion to what they have done, so you might not reward someone with a thousand pounds for handing in a good end-of-term essay.

While these principles may guide us in how to treat individuals in ways that they deserve, they do not tell us when or under what circumstances we are justified in doing this, what it is that people are owed or due, nor the grounds on which we are justified in treating them differently. Such decisions are subjective and of course depend very much on the context in which they take place. Thus they require different values and judgements about what is the ‘right’ or fair thing to do (Sandel 2010).

So the key issue at stake here is one of entitlement or giving people what they are due. But how do we decide this? Take the following example:

Pete and Sam were both given a piece of homework by their teacher that needed to be completed by the following day. Pete went home and spent the evening researching his homework using the Internet and writing his findings up neatly, and submitted his work the next morning. Sam also completed his work on time but he scribbled it down quickly on the school bus that morning. When the marks came back Pete received a Grade A and Sam a Grade D.

Most people reading this scenario would probably argue that it is fair that Pete received a higher mark than Sam. Pete put a great deal of effort into his work – whereas Sam did not – and that effort ought to be rewarded. But what if we then found out that Sam’s home life was very difficult. He had to care for his sick mother and look after his younger siblings. He had no access to the Internet at home and was not able to visit his local library because he spent the evening cooking for the family and caring for the younger children. Knowledge of Sam’s circumstances might perhaps make us think differently about how he was treated.

The complexity of deciding what is fair and unfair and developing principles to guide us in making this decision has preoccupied philosophers for centuries. However, in our everyday lives we frequently have to make decisions about actions that might be fair or unfair – for example when deciding which type of school to send our children to, or being asked to

listen to politicians' views on how they wish to apply the principles of social justice to improve society.

As you can see from the example of Pete and Sam, when we consider issues of justice or fairness they tend to be about distributing particular rewards or punishments to individuals or to different groups of people. This type of justice is called *distributive justice* and asks us to think about the ways in which we distribute the benefits of society, such as wealth, income, educational opportunities and other resources. There are different ways in which we might do this.

We might, for example, decide to reward everyone *equally* and decide that no one ought to be treated differently and that everyone should get the same resources. Or we might decide to distribute resources according to *need*. So, in the example above, Sam is arguably in the most need of support due to his complicated family life, so more resources should be given to him. However, Pete worked hard and achieved a good mark and therefore he deserves to be rewarded based on his *merit*; after all that was the purpose of the assignment. This is another way to think about how we allocate our resources – according to *merit or desert*.

So we have three principles to help us think how we might treat people fairly:

1. People should be treated according to their merit or what they deserve.
2. People should be treated according to what they need.
3. Everyone should be treated equally and in the same way.

How do we Decide what is Fair?

These ideas of rewarding an individual based on equality, need or merit are key to understanding the different principles of justice. We will consider them in more detail below.

To help us to do this, we can use these three principles suggested by Ruitenberg and Vokey (2010):

- Justice as harmony: based on principles of merit or desert.
- Justice as equity: based on principles of need.
- Justice as equality: based on principles of equal treatment.

Justice as harmony

This approach argues that people have different talents and that these different talents, when put together, will strengthen the community as well as society more widely. Education should seek to support these different talents and by doing so will help enable individuals to reach their (different) potentials.

We can see this principle in use throughout the education system in the UK: in the post-Second World War tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary modern schools; in the division of vocational and academic qualifications and in contemporary programmes to encourage school diversification.

The following example should help us understand this more clearly:

Sarah is an excellent swimmer. She arrives at the pool each morning at 6a.m. and trains for two hours before going to school. On the basis of her swimming success, Sarah wins a scholarship to a highly prestigious school.

According to the principle of *justice as harmony* Sarah should be rewarded for her hard work and commitment and should consider winning this scholarship to be a just reward for all her effort: in other words, she *deserves* it. A contrary view, however, is that justice based on merit or desert, in this case, is unfair. Sarah's success is based – at least partly – on her natural talent and she doesn't deserve the rewards this should bring. Other students may work just as hard as Sarah – perhaps in even more challenging circumstances – but because they are not endowed with a natural talent, they have no way of profiting from the benefits of that talent in the same way that Sarah does. For some, this may be a fairly contentious view to take. Michael Sandel discusses this issue in more detail at www.justiceharvard.org/.

But first consider the same argument from a slightly different perspective:

Susannah attends the same school as Sarah. However, Susannah comes from a wealthy family whose parents can easily afford to pay the large tuition fees. Susannah is not especially talented, nor does she particularly enjoy school, but because she was born to a wealthy family she is able to enjoy the benefits of an excellent education.

Would we raise the same objections to this situation as we might do to Sarah's case above? Perhaps not. Your opinion might depend on your views of private education and perhaps your own experiences of school. One might argue, for example, that Susannah is lucky that she was born to a wealthy family; this privilege, unlike that of Sarah, was not borne out of hard work and so she simply does not deserve to receive such an education. In other words, this scenario might be considered to be more unfair than Sarah's because Susannah's reward (an excellent education) is based on neither merit nor talent. However, an opponent of this view of justice might strongly object and argue that it is Susannah's parents' right to choose the best education for their daughter and that it is unfair and an affront to their liberties to prevent them from doing so. I am not going to try to resolve this issue here but hopefully you can start to see some of the difficulties of applying

different principles of social justice. Interestingly, this view that Susannah's parents should have absolute freedom to choose the education they think best for their daughter resonates with a Libertarian view of justice which holds individual freedom of choice as paramount. There is an excellent introduction to Libertarian views of justice in Sandel (2010). Leaving the issue of private education to one side for a moment (it is something we return to in Chapter 6), let us consider another principle of justice.

Justice as equity

A somewhat different principle of justice is one of *justice as equity*, possibly the most well-known proponent of which is John Rawls (see Box 1.2 on the following page). Rawls argues for an egalitarian notion of justice, the key aim of which is to reduce inequalities. To understand how Rawls' notion of justice might be applied to education, consider the following vignette:

Jacinta has difficulty reading and finds it hard to keep up in class. The teacher has to spend a lot of time helping Jacinta and gives her a lot of attention. Sometimes the other students have to wait for the teacher to stop helping Jacinta and to come and help them.

Our response to the fairness of such a situation might be:

- that Jacinta needs extra help, so it is fair that the teacher should spend more time helping her;

or:

- that the teacher should spend equal time with all the students. It is not fair that others should have to wait.

A supporter of the *justice as equity* argument would say that the first option is the fairer, in other words that it is justifiable for the teacher to treat the students differently in order that their opportunities for success become more equal. Jacinta needs more help and she should therefore receive it in order to give herself the best chance of success. The basis for this argument is that not all students are the same. Instead, they are different in terms of what they need in order to be able to reach a particular level of achievement (Brighouse and Swift 2008). This might be because they come from a disadvantaged social environment, have special educational needs or speak a different language to the one used in school. This would mean that in order for them to achieve similar educational outcomes to more advantaged students more resources would need to be given to them.

Box 1.2: Rawls' theory of justice

John Rawls (1921–2002) was an American philosopher who is credited with producing one of the most influential works on political theory of the twentieth century. Rawls argues for a liberal egalitarian view of justice, two principles of which are:

Each person has the same infeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all.

Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society.

(Rawls 2001: 42–3)

Thus Rawls holds basic liberties as paramount (such as access to a basic education); only when these basic rights are assured is the second principle relevant. This second principle is interesting because it enables inequalities to exist within society, as long as first everyone has an equal chance of securing these advantaged positions (through equality of opportunity) and that these inequalities serve to benefit the most vulnerable in society. Thus it is acceptable for individuals to earn large amounts of money, provided that part of that money is redistributed to the least wealthy through the taxation system.

According to Rawls, inequalities (in terms of attainment, income and so on) are justifiable only when they benefit all of society, including the least advantaged. So, for example, it takes many years to become a doctor and when they are finally qualified they tend to work long, often unsociable, hours. Therefore it is fair that doctors earn more money than window cleaners, for example, as their work is of far more benefit to society (particularly its least advantaged members – in this case the sick). It is also acceptable for doctors to receive more education and training than window cleaners as this enables them to fulfil their job to the benefit of everyone. However, Rawls is also quite clear that the different treatment that doctors receive, in terms of the amount of money they earn and the education they receive, is only justified if everyone is able to benefit from better medical care. He also argues that all individuals should have an equal chance of gaining the advantages that being a doctor confers. So, for example, everyone should be able to have access to the education which will lead to the qualifications that would enable one to take up this role – so the opportunity for anyone to train to become a doctor has to be present.

Given that around 60% of medical students in the UK come from 'middle-class' backgrounds (the average for all undergraduates is 36%) (Smith and White 2011), one might ask whether the 'benefits' of being a doctor are actually being shared by everyone and whether, in this instance, Rawls' principles of justice are being met.

Further reading

There is an excellent introduction to Rawls' work in Michael Sandel's book: *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (2010).

Justice as equality

Both *justice as harmony* and *justice as equity* advocate treating people differently. However, with *justice as harmony* different (and possibly unequal) outcomes are expected; the hard-working student deserves more help from the teacher and it is likely that this will be reflected in higher test scores. With *justice as equity* the intention is to equalise an individual's opportunity in order to facilitate more equal (and arguably fairer) outcomes. Here the less able student receives more help from the teacher in order to bring their test scores up to a similar level to their peers.

One further principle of justice – *justice as equality* – takes a slightly different approach. This argues that although people are not the same, they are equally deserving, so equal treatment is essential even if the eventual outcomes are themselves unequal. This would favour the second option in the extract above: Jacinta's teacher ought to devote the same amount of attention to all her students, even if this means that some students will achieve lower grades.

The idea that students should all be treated in the same way is widely held. It is the principle by which the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals require that all children are entitled to free, accessible primary-level education (see Chapter 4). It is also the principle under which the comprehensive system of schooling that we have in most parts of the UK operates, as well as being the standard by which many school children decide whether or not they have been treated fairly by their teachers:

[Teacher] listens to the opinions of pupils who have good marks, but he ignores others who have low marks or who he does not like. This is strange. Teachers should not differentiate pupils. (Japanese student, in Gorard and Smith 2010: 154)

In history, the teacher's 'favourites' don't get punished, can walk round the room, even walk out of the room, and not get punished. The rest of the class isn't acknowledged. (English student, in Gorard and Smith 2010: 162)

We discussed some of the challenges with the principle of equality of opportunity earlier and saw that while we might generally agree that equal educational opportunity means some form of equal treatment we rarely agree about who we should treat equally and who it might be fine to treat

unequally (Jencks 1988). Indeed there are powerful arguments against the principle of equality of opportunity: central for most people is the belief that people are different and should therefore not be treated in the same way, simply because they *deserve* or *need* to be treated differently. Another view is that treating everyone the same will simply lead to mediocrity where the best will not be able to excel, a principle whose extreme consequences were realised by Harrison Bergeron in Kurt Vonnegut Jr's short story of the same name:

The year was 2081, and everybody was finally equal. They weren't only equal before God and the law. They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than everybody else. (Vonnegut 1968: 19)

In this section we have introduced three basic principles of justice. They will be returned to throughout the book and are summarised, in terms of their relationship between how people are treated and the outcome of this treatment, in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Summary of the different principles of justice

Principle of justice	Type of treatment	Type of outcome
Justice as harmony	Different	Different
Justice as equity	Different	Similar
Justice as equality	Similar	Different

As you will hopefully have seen from the above examples, coming up with one clear definition of justice is very difficult and these three principles of justice are complex and often contested. Which one you favour might differ according to your political ideology or the context in which you seek to apply them. So, for example, a free-market libertarian, a welfare liberal and a socialist are likely to have very different notions of justice, each of which fit perfectly logically into their own ideological perspectives. It is also likely that we would apply different principles of justice in different situations. So we might argue that examination grades should reward merit, resources allocated to students with special educational needs should reflect need and equality should dictate mandating free primary education. Indeed, as Miller (2003) argues, it is the context in which the (in)justice takes place which is crucial. Similarly, as Campbell (2010) suggests, there may be no one 'correct' way of looking at justice; instead there might be several different interpretations, all equally valid. In fact it 'may be a mistake to have an overall theory of justice which

has an equal force in all spheres' (2010: 9). That different principles of justice may apply in different situations certainly makes understanding and conceptualising educational justice challenging. But it also makes the study of this topic interesting.

Summary

This chapter has provided a brief introduction to some key topics in the field of social justice and how they might apply to education. We have discussed some of the complexities surrounding the idea of justice and three key principles that can help us to decide whether something is fair or not. We have also read about how education, and schools in particular, are considered to be key agents of social justice, especially in the minds of contemporary politicians. But how are schools able to fulfil this important function? Is it realistic to expect schools to have such a profound impact on the life chances of the students they educate? These are some of the fundamental questions that we consider in this book.

Whatever one's view about the most appropriate way of ensuring that educational opportunities are as fair as possible, it is nevertheless the case that there are many diverse ways in which inequalities can and do manifest themselves within schools. For example, some pupils achieve better examination results than others, attend more 'effective' schools or have longer school careers – thus educational opportunities and outcomes are not distributed equally. It is useful to remember that it is those pupils who are the least academically successful who tend to have the shortest school careers and who may end up leaving school without even the most basic skills. This is not to argue that those who aspire to a career as a lawyer should not have longer educational careers than those who aspire to less 'skilled' jobs, but it is worth reflecting upon how we, as a society, choose to allocate our educational resources. It is also important to consider that remedying society's injustices is not simply the responsibility of teachers and other educators. As we shall see in the next chapter, unfairness extends far beyond the school gates.



Reflection

Consider the following extract from a Year 9 student's report of fair treatment in school. Which different principles of justice might you apply to decide whether or not their experience of school is a fair one?

(Continued)

The boys deserve the punishment they are given (and the girls too) because when they mess around they disturb hard-working pupils. But the punishment doesn't work. Most pupils have no respect for anyone in the school. The better pupils should be placed in a separate class so they can work undisturbed and get the most out of school. (Female student, in Smith and Gorard 2006: 51)

Additional Resources

Michael Sandel's 'Justice' lectures

Michael Sandel's Justice course is one of the most popular in Harvard University's history. The website provides access to Sandel's 24 lectures, as well as discussion guides and suggestions for further reading. It is an excellent introduction to the field. Access from justiceharvard.org.

The history of education in England

Education in England is a very useful web-based resource that provides historical information on the development of education policy in England. It provides a chronology of important events plus access to the full text of many important government reports and papers, including the full text of the 1967 Plowden report on primary schools and the 1963 Robbins report on higher education. Access to the site is through www.educationengland.org.uk/index.html.

Further reading

- Miller, D. (2003) *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sandel, M.J. (2010) *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* London: Penguin.
- Unwin A. and Yandell, J. (2017) *Rethinking Education: Whose Knowledge is it Anyway?* London: New Internationalist.
- Wolf, A. (2000) *Does Education Matter? Myths About Education and Economic Growth*. London: Penguin.
- Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. London: Pelican Books.