

SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

This important book interrogates key educational concepts of social justice, equity and inclusion through a thought-provoking and novel approach. Drawing on Actor Network Theory, Bacchi's post-structural analytical approach to policy, and empirical studies of Malta and Australia, it raises crucial questions and insights for theorizing and conceptualizing some of the most major but intractable issues in schooling today.

*Jane Wilkinson, Professor of Educational Leadership,
Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia*

This book is essential reading for researchers and practitioners of social justice, equity and inclusion in education. It draws on insights and analysis from two of the critical field's leading thinkers and researchers to interrogate and trouble assumptions that are commonly held or deployed about leading for social justice and equity in schools. This vital book represents a significant leap forward in our understanding of how schools work when they aim at practice and outcomes which are socially just and inclusive. The book is exemplary as a critical text in its expert theorization of the landscape, mechanisms and outcomes of schooling – and leading – for social justice. Its dual, comparative focus on the cases of Malta and New South Wales, Australia is illuminating and incisive, and points the way to new ways of thinking internationally.

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SCHOOLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Problematizing Theory,
Policy and Practice

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I would like to dedicate this book to all those who have suffered any form of injustice throughout their lifetime as students and/or education practitioners at various levels in compulsory schooling, and simultaneously to those who strive to bring about more socially just education systems.

I have been inspired to write this book by my various experiences of social injustice in education that I have either lived directly or witnessed at the triage of theory, policy and practice as a student, teacher, educational leader and academic.

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Erratum: It has come to the attention of the publisher that the book Mifsud, D. (2024) *Schooling for Social Justice, Equity and Inclusion* was originally published with three incomplete citations in Chapter 2, specifically

Landri (2020). *Educational leadership, management, and administration through actor-network theory*. Routledge.

Mifsud (2020). A critical review of actor-network theory and its use in education research. In E. Idemudia (Ed.), *Optimizing social and organizational dynamics in the digital era* (pp. 135–156). IGI Global.

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This was due to an error in the typesetting process and has now been corrected in the online version. The corrected citations are as follows:

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The publisher sincerely apologizes to the readers for this error and for any inconvenience caused.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION AND SCHOOLING

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ABSTRACT

This introduction aims to set the context for the subsequent chapters that problematize various aspects of social justice, equity, and inclusion through particular lenses, and/or methodologies. This is done by presenting the ‘problem’ of social justice and equity in education, while simultaneously making links with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The term ‘social justice’ is appearing in numerous public texts and discourses within the education field, thus becoming a key concept in current education policy and practice. Moreover, the concept of social justice is crucial to theorizing about education and schooling, consequently being considered by politicians, policymakers, and practitioners in their thinking about the nature of education and the purpose of schools. Regrettably, education practitioners, researchers, and policymakers often



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utilize this umbrella term (social justice) while leaving out salient details about its social, cultural, economic, and political bearing. Notwithstanding the unanimous agreement on the desirability of social justice as an educational goal, this is complemented by a parallel contestation over its actual meaning and application in relation to schooling, that is, in relation to the formulation of policy and how it is to be included in practice. This chapter seeks to unravel the conceptual confusion around the terms social justice, equity, and inclusion in relation to schooling and education, through an exploration of the existing literature in the field.

Keywords: Compulsory schooling; equity; inclusion; OECD policy; research methods in education; social justice; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

INTRODUCTION

Following substantial periods of pandemic-induced school closures, students returned with unequal levels of knowledge and skills. Some students, especially those from more underprivileged backgrounds, failed to return. Moreover, COVID-19 moved the curriculum online as it became ‘embedded in devices that technologize our children’ (Pacheco, 2021, p. 11) leading to the question of whether the ‘sustainable, inclusive human development’ (United Nations, 2019, p. 64) is achievable through this new accelerating normal post-pandemic. The COVID-19 impact highlighted inequalities of multiple kinds, especially so in school provision and family support, thus the necessity of a global focus on the common good. Therefore, understanding and mitigating the impact of school closures, especially in terms of learning losses is high on the agenda of education policy makers who are struggling to minimize disruptions to education, particularly towards the neediest. This leads to an explicit emphasis on equity in education, and its counterparts of inclusion and social justice, issues aligning closely with the global SDGs of ‘No Poverty’ (SDG 1) and ‘Quality Education’ (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015). The main purpose of this book is to problematize discourses of social justice, equity, and inclusion that are presented as given constructs to schools and through which they are expected to initiate schooling provision and practices to ‘solve’ a wider societal, national, and global plaguing setback. This will be done via applications of social theory to conceptual and empirical case studies from Malta and Australia, two English-speaking Commonwealth countries that despite diverging in

area, population size, and geographic location, present issues that can be applied across different contexts, demonstrating the universality and simultaneous distinction across thorny matters related to social justice, equity, and inclusion in schools worldwide.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION AND COMPULSORY SCHOOLING: A CASE OF FORBIDDEN FRUIT?

According to [Connell \(2012\)](#),

Education is dangerous, because schools do not just reproduce culture, they shape the new society that is coming into existence all around us ... Social justice concerns the nature of the service itself, and its consequences for society through time ... [a time where] Education becomes a zone of manufactured insecurity, with achievement through competition as the only remedy. But in a zero-sum competition, achievement for one means failure for all the rest. (p. 681)

[Connell \(2012\)](#) above draws attention to a major shift in school systems inequalities based on institutional segregation to new forms steered by market mechanisms with students redefined as competitive clients in complete disregard to educationally relevant differences such as poverty, gender, ethnicity, rurality, sexual orientation, and migrant status, among others. This points to a lack of adequate educational responses to deep diversity in terms of curricular justice and the social encounters constituting an (un)just education system.

The term ‘social justice’ in the field of education in general and particularly in schools has been the subject of much scholarly debate, resulting in a plurality of conceptions and interpretations, with no clear consensus as to what constitutes a socially just society, and consequently, a socially just school. A significant shortcoming in the literature is the lack of say from those non-Anglophone nations not considered as geopolitically dominant ([Gumus et al., 2021](#)), leading to a reconsideration of educational systems in transitional and previously under-represented areas and their having to take the direction of Western countries. Stressing the vital nature of context, [Waite and Arar \(2020\)](#) problematize the concepts of ‘the social’ and ‘culture’ in social justice education, that ‘in their mundane, common usage, are problematic and can get us into trouble’ (p. 172), thus advocating a recognition of difference. [MacDonald \(2023a\)](#) notes that the existing literature advocates for an all-embracing understanding of social justice in an attempt to attend to the differences in educational outcomes resulting from social, cultural,

economic, and political opportunities, or lack of. Notwithstanding, all educational struggles for social justice ‘remain unfinished and incomplete’ (Bogotch et al., 2008, p. xii). Fraser (2013) prefers a particular way of thinking about injustice by focusing on distribution and querying ‘How much economic inequality does justice permit?’ (p. 192); on recognition in terms of ‘What constitutes equal respect, which kinds of differences merit public recognition?’ (p. 192); as well as representation, ‘If representation is the defining issue of the political, then the characteristic political injustice is misrepresentation’ (p. 192). In the context of globalization, Fraser (2013) suggests that the focus on injustices revolves around ‘integrating struggles against maldistribution, misrecognition, and misrepresentation within a post-Westphalian frame’ (p. 208). This three-dimensional theory encompasses the economic, cultural, and political dimensions (Fraser, 2005). Distributive principles, the economic dimension, acknowledge the inequitable allocation of material aids, including exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation. Recognitive principles, the cultural dimension, focus on the equal acknowledgement of the historical and cultural perspectives of all groups within a particular society. Representative justice, the political dimension, gives all people the right of participation and opinion.

Pijanowski and Brady (2020) argue that despite the lack of consensus on definitions of social justice, there are recurrent themes and concepts in the plurality of social justice meanings, by identifying two primary conceptualizations of social justice in education across theory and practice. These concepts of distributive justice and social recognition, though ‘not mutually exclusive in theory, they can in practice serve to unintentionally undermine the other’ (p. 2). Distributive approaches to social justice have been however critiqued for positioning children as consumers without acknowledging them as products of social processes (Young, 1990). Similarly, North (2006) highlights two tensions that emerge from the amalgamation of distribution and recognition in relation to social justice in practice. The first tension incorporates disparate emphasis on equality as difference and equality as sameness, while the second source of friction evolves from varying degrees of attention to both macro (e.g. policymaking) and micro (e.g. individual behaviours) level processes. For educators and scholars, social justice encompasses what a socially just education system looks like in practice, and the role of education in the development and maintenance of a socially just society.

Pijanowski and Brady (2020) argue that social justice is so elusive to singularly define due to its ‘multidisciplinary and multi-action nature’, further stating that ‘simply dividing complex constructs like education evenly or equitably falls short of acknowledging how various oppressive systems heavily influenced the design of those same educational goods and how

systemic oppression has affected the ways in which people access education’ (p. 4). Social justice as an issue cannot be compartmentalized into and attributed to the schooling milieu, teachers and schools are not the problem, but rather the structural and systemic inequalities that politicians and policy makers tend to ignore through the lack of adequate policy focus. [Lingard \(2021\)](#) further argues that in contemporary politics and policy, social justice has been datafied and framed by metrics in what [Mau \(2019\)](#) calls the ‘metric society’, thus the need to retether to a way of thinking about injustice ([Lingard et al., 2014](#)). The meritocratic and social mobility function of schools is linked to the extent of structural inequality, with [Wooldridge \(2021\)](#) stating that ‘the meritocratic elite is in danger of hardening into an aristocracy which passes on its privileges to its children by investing heavily in education, and which, because of its sustained success, looks down on the rest of society’ (p. 17).

THE SUBORDINATION OF EDUCATION TO ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

[Reay \(2022\)](#) argues that educational policy is bound by the prescriptions of the OECD and its global monitoring systems, stating that ‘the OECD has always been, and remains, an economic institution led by economists’ (p. 436). However, economics as a discipline has proven itself weak on social justice and inequality ([Walraevens, 2021](#)). Under the guise of being a global driver of educational improvement, the OECD has neglected other immeasurable aspects of school life, such as well-being, relationships, and collegiality, that are equally important to improve performance holistically ([McNamara et al., 2021](#)).

[MacDonald \(2023a\)](#) highlights the fact that the terms ‘equity’ and ‘social justice’, are used interchangeably in studies of poverty and disadvantage, while the OECD equitable policy schooling recommendations consider equity in terms of fairness and inclusiveness ([Field et al., 2007](#)). Social justice has been reformulated as equity to be regarded as a gauge of comparative performance ([Keddie, 2012](#); [Lingard et al., 2014](#)), with both terms becoming problematic in that ‘stronger conceptions of social justice as equality of opportunity in an equal society have given way to weaker conceptions of equity as fairness in a meritocratic society’ ([Lingard et al., 2014](#), pp. 71–712). [Rizvi and Lingard \(2009\)](#) also suggest that equality has been relegated by the OECD from being a moral value to becoming a component of human capital development. [Boyum \(2014\)](#) also criticizes the OECD policy documents for their inherent meritocratic outlook, stating that it ‘explicitly operates with a loose idea of equal opportunity ... but implicitly with a meritocratic variant of fair equality of opportunity’ (p. 865). He further concludes that the processes of the OECD

set apart educational justice from social justice in general emphasizing ‘equality of opportunity as a means through which to achieve positions in the social hierarchy ... [without any] discussion of the rightfulness of that social hierarchy itself’ (p. 867).

This subordination of education to economic imperatives is reiterated by [Ross \(2021\)](#):

Meritocracy has turned education into a competition for accreditation. Equality of opportunity is used to justify the concentration of educational resources on the fraction of the population who are judged to best benefit by its efforts ... It is turned into a game, with the metaphor of a level playing field being used to justify winners and losers. Despite the rhetoric of raising standards, the objective of the educational system is to identify and mark sheep and goats. The losers ... become the authors of their own subsequent misfortunes, and are encouraged to believe and accept this. (pp. 8–9, original emphasis)

Inevitably, issues of social justice and equality are sidelined in a system where educational inequalities have been rationalized as a matter of economic inefficiency that needs to be addressed to increase productivity rather than social justice. Educational inequalities are tightly interwoven with social inequalities and cannot be addressed in isolation. [Reay \(2012\)](#) questions the extent to which a socially just educational system is possible in an unjust society, calling out the focus on social mobility as ‘a red herring’, as it is ‘primarily about recycling inequality rather than tackling it’ (p. 593). Consequently, she identifies three main areas acting as barriers to a socially just educational system that revolve around attitudes, the economy, and neoliberalism. The pre-set belief of the upper and middle classes of their own social and intellectual superiority, together with the myth of a swelling middle class despite the reality of a large working-class cohort amid growing relative poverty are problematic notions. These two factors are buttressed by the highly competitive culture of neoliberalism that prohibits far-reaching systemic changes, social redistribution, radical curriculum innovation, and discursive shifts required for a socially just educational system.

Do educational policies act as change agents or reproducers of social structures? It is possible, and highly probable, for educational practices to replicate the existing, persistent inequalities within society. [Hartsmar et al. \(2021\)](#) identify three main claims that are generally utilized for educational policies targeted at reducing social inequalities. These are attributed to social reasons (unequal treatment among different social groups); economic justifications (inequalities engendered by the exclusive focus on education to increase economic competitiveness);

and the human rights and equity argument (encompassing recognition of all group differences to minimize the differential access to rights imposed by society). Potentially disadvantaged groups may fall under the following broad categories: socioeconomic disadvantage; minority ethnic disadvantage; gender; indigenous minorities; disability; linguistic minorities; and religious minorities. It is also the case that degrees of disadvantage exist and the conceptualization of social difference varies between countries, nations, and geopolitical standing. There is also the issue of intersectionality of factors among those various disadvantaged groups that may yield complex inequalities that are challenging to address. Various explanations for inequalities in schools have been provided, all bearing implicitly and explicitly on policy. These include pathological explanations; transmitted deprivation; home-based factors; school factors; and societal structure. Education alone cannot reduce inequality; moreover, policies in other areas may inadvertently undermine the impact of educational policies targeted to address inequity. [Hartsmar et al. \(2021\)](#) identify four particular policy responses that hamper the achievement of equitable educational outcomes. The first is the denial of the existence of disadvantaged groups, where countries are reluctant to acknowledge the lack of homogeneity. The second response was to confuse categories, including all inequalities under the (socio)economic umbrella. Equality policies may also be in competition with other policy agendas, thus having a counter-effect on schooling. Some policies fail to address equality of outcome, with their sole focus being on the provision of 'equality of opportunity', blaming individuals who fail to be 'opportunistic'. I regard the four responses hereby discussed as 'policies of evasion' rather than 'policies of engagement' leading to further systemic inequity.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PRACTICE: ENACTMENTS IN CLASSROOMS AND SCHOOLS

As discussed previously, the identification of an exclusive, universally accepted definition of social justice in education remains elusive, but there appear to be three evolving views of the social justice phase in the field ([Pijanowski & Brady, 2020](#)). The social justice lexicon is becoming more expansive and inclusive in terms of philosophical explorations and activity types, while social justice conversations within educational systems, whereas previously considered as politically volatile, have become politically normed. Furthermore, stronger links have developed at the convergence of distributive justice, social recognition, and macro/micro conceptions of justice.

School leaders are expected to foster an inclusive and equitable environment for all students, irrespective of background and of the inherently inequitable

society within which the school operates. A social justice approach has been conceptualized as ‘positionality, a set of analytical skills, and a disposition for positive transformation’ (Pijanowski & Brady, 2020, p. 11). DeMatthews et al. (2021) classify school principals as either improvement-focused or intersectional-focused in their attempt to foster school-inclusive cultures. Improvement-focused leaders regard developing inclusive practices and raising student achievement as complementary, while intersectional-focused ones engage in ongoing critique of traditional approaches to special education practices and routines. While different levels of intentionality in the weaving of social justice framing in educators’ modus operandi exist, it is evident that effective leadership practices cannot be extricated from social justice concepts (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007).

Notwithstanding the moral justification for social justice efforts in education, a number of obstacles remain at both operational and conceptual levels. Promoting the academic and socio-emotional growth of all students is problematic. Moreover, the segregation and exclusion of underprivileged and disenfranchised social groups is frequently simulated in schools where fostering an environment that acknowledges and embraces differences is increasingly difficult. These may be exacerbated by other barriers to social justice leadership initiatives that try to mobilize intra-institutional activism. This may be due to the principals’ ethical commitment to upholding rules; other hindering policies; traditional community values; the convergence of multiple socio-economic challenges; and the existence of contradictory social justice goals (Berkovich, 2014). Other issues relate to a lack of recognition of cultural variations, lack of acknowledgement of sociopolitical issues in diverse geographical areas, as well as the challenges of addressing students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Qureshi et al., 2020). Of greater concern is the ‘implicit bias’ present in schools that ultimately has a negative influence on students not considered ‘mainstream’. Implicit bias acts on students through four pathways, that are: teacher expectations; teacher traits; curricular materials; and access in a system where ‘social justice is often vaguely represented as more of a phenomenon than a measurable concept’ (Beachum & Gullo, 2020, p. 20). In addition to the above-mentioned obstacles to social justice in schools, many countries lack the infrastructure necessary to assess the effectiveness of those measures adopted to foster social justice (Samman et al., 2018). In the present scenario where current education policy ‘disadvantages too many in the interests of the too few’ (p. 42), Woods (2021) advocates for scepticism among educators and researchers in their quest for ‘high quality, high equity education systems’:

The question to be asked of evidence-based practice is what evidence. The question to be asked of national benefit is benefit for who. The questions to be asked when told that all children must