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An introduction to education and social justice

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

(Gordon Brown, speech to the University of Greenwich, October 2007)

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 Coalition 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 education and social justice and their impact on what we understand by a fair and equitable school system. This chapter examines what we mean by social justice. It 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 final section brings together these ideas in order to compare different perspectives on the purpose of education in contemporary society.

The Politics of Social Justice

Over the last 30 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 the National Curriculum, school choice, high-stakes testing and school accountability

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through league tables, have been the result of different political views on how best to achieve a world-class education system. The role that education can play in promoting social justice has been particularly prominent, with parties on both the political Left and Right seeing education as key to reducing social inequality:

Without good education there can be no social justice. (Cameron 2007: 84)

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

As the above quotations illustrate, the role of education in reducing 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. In this chapter we will 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 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 the current Prime Minister David Cameron. Cameron's view is 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 is the reverse of Gordon Brown's view. For the new UK Coalition government, limiting the role of the state in educational matters is exemplified by plans to expand the academy schools programme and the establishment of new Swedish-style free schools (both of which are examined more closely in Chapter 3). These initiatives will mean a lessening of the control that government and local authorities have over how schools are administered. In the case of academies this will involve allowing the most 'outstanding' schools increased autonomy over the curriculum, admissions policies as well as teachers' pay and conditions. For critics who consider the role of the state to be crucial in ensuring educational equity, such proposals are tantamount to privatisation (for example, Bousted 2010; Ball 2007).

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 put simply, 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 Summary of political viewpoints on the relationship between poverty and education

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 prevents them from absorbing the education that is available.

(Thurow 1977)

A good illustration of how the two main political parties differ with regard to the role of the state and the individual can be seen by examining the views of two recent long-serving Prime Ministers: Tony Blair (1997–2007) and Margaret Thatcher (1979–90). 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 is 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, was far less sceptical about the term 'social justice' and explicitly linked 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; see also Pyke 1997)

In his pamphlet *The Third Way*, which was published towards the start of his premiership, Tony Blair (1998) argued forcibly for a politics that moved away from 'Old Left' ideals of state control and away from a 'New Right' that treated social issues 'as evils to be undone' (p. 1). While it is quite difficult to define what the Third Way actually means (Dale 2000), in Blair's view Third Way politics advocate an 'enabling' government that, passionate in its commitment to social justice, would harness the power of the markets to serve the public interest (p. 7). The Third Way sees social justice and equality as resting on four values: equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community (p. 3).

In the thirteen years that Labour was last in office, issues of social justice underpinned most of their social and educational policies (Hills and Stewart 2005; Hills et al. 2009). Their record on social justice and the extent to which they have succeeded in making society fairer is explored briefly in Chapter 2 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 calls, 'Broken Britain'. His view of a 'Big Society' presents 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' represents 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 3) or encouraging people to undertake more voluntary work or charitable giving. Either way it involves 'taking power away from politicians and giving it to people' and, so Cameron argues, enabling society to become fairer (Cameron 2010b).

Here we have seen different 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, in particular, 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). Despite these different political views of the extent to which the state should or should not enable social justice, the notion of a fair society is central to contemporary political policy. 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?

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?

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 consider what it is that we mean by social justice and equality in the first place. 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 notion 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 problem we have is in deciding who deserves what.

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.
- Secondly, 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 concepts 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.

What Principles Might We Use to Understand 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.

Ruitenberg and Vokey (2010) conceptualise these three principles in the following ways:

- *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

We start with Plato's conception of what Ruitenberg and Vokey (2010) call *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 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 6 a.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. 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 3), 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). 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 inalienable 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 per cent of medical students in the UK come from 'middle-class' backgrounds (the average for all undergraduates is 36 per cent) (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 UNESCO's Education for All programme requires that all children are entitled to free, accessible primary-level education. 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)

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)

However, 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, either 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 and the 'weakest' will struggle, or as Edward Burke (1790) famously wrote: 'Those who attempt to level never equalise.'

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

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.

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. According to Campbell (2010) 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' (p. 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.

In this section we have introduced 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? In the next section we look at three different perspectives on the function of schools.

What are Schools for?

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)

Whatever their differing ideologies on how best to achieve a more just society, the political consensus that education is at the heart of social justice issues does give rise to the question: what are schools for? In this short section we will introduce three potential functions of schooling: the role of schools in producing a highly skilled workforce who will help ensure the economic productivity of the nation; the philosophers' view of the holistic role of schooling; and finally an alternative perspective on the apparent harm that our current education system brings to those that we seek to educate and care for.

For many policy-makers the answer to the question 'what are schools for?' would seem to be that they are there to prepare the next generation of workers and that 'education is the best economic policy' (Brown 2007). This view, however, is not uncontroversial. In her excellent book *Does Education Matter?* Alison Wolf suggests that 'our preoccupation with education as an engine of growth has ... narrowed – dismally and progressively – our vision of education itself' (2000: 254). She argues that while an overwhelming case can be made for the state's involvement in basic education, the millions of pounds that are invested in generating a 'knowledge economy' – through the expansion of the post-compulsory education and training sector – has simply resulted in expansion as an end in itself. According to Wolf the consequences of expanding provision for education and training, in particular through the rapid increase in university places, have done little to benefit the most vulnerable in society – those for whom the general education system has failed. Such a view is particularly pertinent in light of the government's current plans to raise the school leaving age to 18 from 2015. These are important issues for those interested in educational justice and it is a theme to which we return in Chapter 8.

The wider purpose of schooling, beyond the purely economic, has preoccupied philosophers for centuries; indeed, it is a topic that is as 'old as philosophy itself'. That major philosophers from John Locke to Leo Tolstoy to Bertrand Russell have concerned themselves with the topic is evident from the numerous books which share the title 'On Education' (see, for example, Brighouse 2006). Unsurprisingly there are many different views on the nature and purpose of education and schooling and interested readers would do well to begin with the edited collection of papers in Bailey et al. (2010).

However, one widely held view among contemporary philosophers of education is that 'the central purpose of education is to promote human flourishing' (Brighouse 2006: 42). In advancing his perspective Brighouse argues that schools 'should orient themselves to the needs of the children who will have to deal with the economy, and not to the needs of the economy itself' (2006: 28). He goes on to suggest four functions of schooling, which should enable children to:

- become 'autonomous, self governing adults' (p. 131);
- become economically self-reliant;

- 'lead flourishing lives' (p. 42);
- become 'responsible, deliberative citizens who are capable of accepting the demands of justice and abiding by the norm of reciprocity' (p. 131).

The view that education has a key role in encouraging children to flourish places greater emphasis on the role of schools in helping shape the next generation of 'socially and morally responsible citizens' than is currently apparent in our education system. It is a view of education that is at odds with the current preoccupation with academic standards, and suggests a notion of schooling that is closer to Pring's (2010) conception of an educated 19-year-old who

... has a sufficient grasp of those ideas and principles to enable him or her to manage life intelligently, who has the competence and skills to tackle practical tasks including those required for employment, who has a sense of community and the disposition to make a contribution to it, who is morally serious in the sense that he or she cares about fairness and responsibility to others, who is inspired by what has been done by others and who has a sense and knowledge of self-confidence and resilience in the face of difficulty ... Such an aim should shape the education for the future. (p. 63)

The role of schools as mini communities or societies is something that we return to in Chapter 6 when we explore the opportunities that schools and the curriculum provides students to develop and flourish as active, engaged citizens. Next, however, we consider an arguably more negative aspect of schooling that is at odds with our general conceptions of schools as fair and caring places.

In his book *Toxic Schooling: How Schools Became Worse*, Clive Harber (2009) takes issue with the widely held assumption that enrolment in formal schooling is a 'good thing', arguing instead that schools serve to perpetuate and reproduce inequalities. In addition:

... schools far from consistently and uniformly being institutions of care and protection in fact both reproduce and cause violence. Not only do they not necessarily protect pupils from different forms of violence in the wider society, but they actively perpetuate violence on pupils themselves. (p. 4)

Harber presents synopses of a number of key texts written during the 1960s and 1980s (including the book by Illich (1971) on deschooling) that examine the extent to which children's experiences of school deviate from the idealised role of schools as agents of social reform. The book makes difficult reading, with schooling variously characterised as oppressive, dominative, indoctrinating, deferential, docile, institutionalised, taming and controlling. Harber argues that dissatisfaction and unease with schooling is not new; neither has it lessened in the decades since the books he covers were written. While the educational ideologies followed in schools such as Summerhill (see Box 1.3) might provide a counter to much of what Harber argues is wrong with our current school system, they are not without controversy and arguably sit uneasily with many people's notions of what an effective school might be.

Box 1.3 Summerhill: an exercise in democratic schooling

Summerhill is an example of a progressive school whose philosophy, according to its founder A.S. Neill, is to 'make the school to fit the child, instead of the child to fit the school' (Neill 1964: 4). Founded in 1921 and located in a village in Suffolk, England, Summerhill is an independent school teaching around 80 children aged 5–17. It is a school which has made famous the notion that children should be free to decide for themselves how to spend their time: there is no compulsory timetable, exams only for those who wish to take them and no adherence to particular teaching methods. It is a place where everyone, from the head teacher to the youngest pupil, is treated equally and with respect, and where rules are made and changed with the consensus of the entire school community (Neill 1964). Since its founding, Summerhill has drawn much criticism: Max Rafferty, a former Superintendent of Public Instruction for California, described the school as a 'dirty joke' which 'degrades learning to the status of a disorganised orgy' (Rafferty 1970: 24). Possibly the biggest challenge came in 1999 when the school inspectorate, Ofsted, criticised the school for an 'abrogation of educational responsibility and a failure of management and leadership' (Ofsted 1999: para. 11); it further concluded that 'the instruction is not efficient or suitable' (para. 29). Happier times have returned following a successful Ofsted inspection in 2007 that, in acknowledging the school's particular philosophy, praised as 'outstanding' the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of Summerhill pupils (Ofsted 2007).

Further reading

Neil, A. S. (1964) *Summerhill: A Radical Approach to Education*. London: Victor Gollancz.

Vaughan, M. (ed.) (2006) *Summerhill and A. S. Neil*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

There is a list of recommended reading on the school's website: <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk>

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 looked at a few of the different philosophical perspectives on justice and seen how politicians apply the term both to education and to society more widely. The chapter concluded with a brief overview of some perspectives on the different functions of schooling: both positive and negative. However, 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?

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)

Additional Resources

Below are a number of resources on issues of social justice. None of these sites focus explicitly on issues of educational justice but do provide a very useful introduction to wider concepts of justice and fairness. Michael Sandel's Harvard lectures are particularly good.

Michael Sandel's 'Justice' lectures

Michael Sandel's Justice course is one of the most popular in Harvard University's history. The website provides televised access to Sandel's 12 lectures, as well as discussion guides and suggestions for further reading. It is an excellent introduction to the field. You can access the lecture on <http://www.justiceharvard.org/>.

Open University resources on justice

In parallel with the BBC Justice season, the Open University hosts a useful website on a number of topics related to social justice. Resources include downloadable

MP3 files exploring topics such as blame and historical injustices, justice and the law, and moral aspects of injustice. It also provides access to study units that provide a basic introduction to political philosophy: <http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/whats-on/ou-on-the-bbc-justice-season>.

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 <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/index.html>.

Further reading

- Brighouse, H. (2006) *On Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Harber, C. (2009) *Toxic Schooling: How Schools Became Worse*. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press.
- 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.
- Wolf, A. (2000) *Does Education Matter? Myths About Education and Economic Growth*. London: Penguin.