From equality to diversity? Ideas that keep us quiet

by Jonathan Rix

It is not what you give to the poor that makes all the difference; it is what
you have taken from them, and continue to take from them. (Hart, 2011
p399)

Introduction

Our understanding of what constitutes, creates and perpetuates social inequality is
interwoven with a complex web of personal, historical and cultural assumptions. The
language we use in thinking about issues of social change and social control is a key
part of society’s ‘hidden curriculum’. It not only gives rise to our ways of learning but
also to our relationship with our systems and institutions.

Consideration of language as power struggle is particularly relevant to a book which
in its title links equality and diversity with education. As Illich (1970) exhorts us to
recognise, our schooling system adds prejudice to the discrimination endemic within
our social networks, compounding our involvement and reaffirming the privilege of a
minority over the majority; it “serves as a ritual of initiation into a growth-oriented
consumer society for rich and poor alike” (Illich, 1970, p21).

This chapter ranges across a broad spectrum of issues from the individual to the
global, aiming to highlight the complex web of historical and cultural assumptions
which influence us and the communities in which we live and work. We examine how concepts of advancement frequently associated with education, and which seem fundamentally linked to the betterment of the human condition, are themselves a consequence and cause of inequitable policies and practices. We will consider in particular key terms associated with overcoming social injustice, in the context of the neo-liberal agenda.

We frame our discussion around equality and diversity but, given the manner in which the neo-liberal agenda had taken ownership of these terms, we will also consider our understanding of globalisation, growth, participation and inclusion. In so doing we face a similar challenge to that laid down by Judith Butler (2004) a need to recognise that “our most treasured values are under contestation and that they will remain contested zones of politics” (p175).

Equality

Whose equal?

The concept of Equality takes many forms and has been used over many centuries by philosophers, theorists, campaigners, politicians and writers. Pojman (1995), for example, identifies 16 varieties of use of the concept equality, categorising its wide range of application. Despite this slipperiness, the term appears in national and international legislation and policy with remarkable regularity, appearing for example

\[\text{1 The neo-liberal agenda has been dominant within global politics since the 1980s. It is underpinned by the notion of the individual purportedly free to manage their own personal and economic growth within a growth economy, involving the manipulation of interest rates and the development of ‘free-trade’ and flexible labour supply (Peck and Tickell, 2002).}\]
over 180 times in eight of the United Nation conventions associated with the alleviation of oppression (Owen, 2011). It does so, though without clearly defining what it actually means. From the outset the fundamental nature of what is ‘equal’ has been open to interpretation and negotiation\(^2\). As a consequence the concept of equality which arose out of an era of civil rights and desegregation campaigns, with its focus upon universal rights and redistribution of material goods, has come to be interpreted differently in the context of globalized capitalism, with its focus upon individuality, competition and choice within a purported meritocracy.

Consider for example the notion of equal opportunities which has emerged in policy since the 1970s. It presupposes that everyone has the right to equal treatment and access to rights and goods, but as a consequence (and perhaps ironically) this suppresses our recognition of difference (Baltodano, 2006). Young (1990) suggests that this suppression leads to cultural imperialism. This “universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm” (p59, cited in Baltodano, 2006) leads to a more subtle and naturalised impression of social division than the one that came before.

The rhetoric of a multicultural melting pot also frames our understanding of delivering equality through universal services (including education). Within this rhetoric, cultural equality, pride and rights are endorsed and encouraged (Hale, 2005). However,

\(^2\) Within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) 10 equalities are identified: equal in dignity and rights; equal before the law; equal protection of the law; equal protection against any discrimination; equal entitlement to a fair and public hearing; equal rights as to marriage; equal access to public service; equal suffrage; equal pay for equal work.; equal access based on merit to technical and professional education.
there is an on-going oppression of marginalised social groups. The dominant social groups are able to maintain the status quo whilst appearing to support those they marginalise. The notion of equality becomes a screen behind which the replication of inequality is hidden.

**Equality, development and the individual**

Within many policy and legislative documents, equality has become associated with development. For example within the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000) under the heading of equality, it is stated that ‘no individual and no nation must be denied the opportunity to benefit from development’. This not only begs the question as towards what is one supposed to develop, but also what is supposed to drive this development? The document makes it clear that development is meant to be *moving out of poverty*, and that the key is developing national resources to finance this. The development must also be sustainable.

Equality it would seem is only achievable via economic growth; and as Leal (2010) points out, no discussion seems to be required about what the underlying cause of poverty might be in the first place. Equality is withdrawn from the political arena and becomes about ensuring the conditions for survival (Dagnino, 2010). Either it becomes a place for charity or achieving it becomes the individual’s responsibility.

As a consequence of this shift, influential international reports, such as those produced by the World Bank on youth development, are able to frame the development of young people’s lives and learning by reference to work, capital and
productivity (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008). The individual and their skills and capacities seem to provide an answer to overcoming their poverty. The contradictions and conflicts between the nature of opportunities available to them and their capacity to develop economically valuable skills can be put to one side. The economically correct mantra that growth will alleviate suffering means there need be no discussion about the real value of those ‘economically valuable’ skills to the individual and to the general well being of their communities.

The well established pattern of inequality via growth

From its outset as a political and economic driver, growth has created enormous social and geographical dislocations, leading to ever larger populations of underemployed adults and young people, either living in or migrating to expanding urban settings, and who become attached to identities and ways of life that are at odds with goals of the values of the system (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008). As Hart (2011) details, these processes emerged from the 1600s onwards within the United Kingdom. They came out of the enclosing of land and clearances of agricultural communities, with the shift to a coin based and then paper based economy, where a healthy subsistence diet was replaced by payment for labour. Wages were increasingly driven down alongside rising prices by the use of short-term employment and travelling labour. The national debt was established to fund military campaigns, and deepened to fund standing armies because of a purported danger from overseas and poverty-inspired revolutionaries. Corrupt politicians paid sinecures to friends and
allies, protecting investors in the national debt and the burgeoning banking system, and funding huge building projects. Payments to the poor under the Poor Laws were repeatedly cut on grounds that they damaged the economy and rewarded the undeserving, and were replaced with institutions into which those on the margins were locked away. Empire building and emigration opened up new horizons of resources, markets and labour, and the most lauded writers and thinkers of their day, such as Malthus and Smith and More, provided the propaganda and intellectual arguments to justify the demonising of the poor and imposition of strategies to maximise the profit of a few.

When placed in this context we can look upon the development of our world not as a history of progress, but ‘as eine Verlustsgeschichte, a history of successive losses’ to our environment, ‘social bonds and conviviality’ (Rist, 2010, p25). Rather than being a journey towards equality, growth is more akin to the metaphor of the Great Wen [a sebaceous cyst] which the 19th Century activist William Cobbett applied to London.

Is equality achieved by involving ever more people in growth?

---

3 For example: “If every poor man….would try to trace the evils which have befallen him to their proper source….he would perhaps find that more of the hardships he now suffers are owing to his own fault than he would imagine….Either want of industry when he was young, or want of economy when he was a little older, and might easily have laid up money; want of temperance, chastity, sobriety, want of character for strict truth and exact integrity; want of prudence in some of the important steps of his life and above all want of religion, which is the root indeed of all the other sins I have named.” (Hannah More, Hints to All Ranks of People, p29 cited in Hart, 2011, p158).
The same displacement processes described by Hart, are currently evident in many communities across the world. These communities are generally labelled as developing or emerging, but if those heavily politicised terms are laid aside, they can be described more honestly as the majority of humanity. The labels 'developing' and 'emerging' were applied within the Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000), alongside the notion of 'globalization'. Globalization is a key conceptual partner for growth and one that has a much longer history than is frequently suggested (Rix, 2010). Without globalisation you lose the capacity to grow new markets and new sources of labour and resources. Turning globalization into a positive force for all has therefore been posed as a central challenge, but one that offers great opportunities – one which global organisations insist can be ‘made fully inclusive and equitable’ (UN, 2000, I,5. p2).

The opportunities for the positive force within globalization would not appear to rest within the economic sphere however. Capital and goods move across boundaries, but relatively few workers can do so; technological developments mean many changes have produced no new jobs or have resulted in jobs moving to other locations. Employment changes have tended to benefit those who have the social and economic capacity to take advantage of the situation, with many traditional job roles disappearing. Market and currency dealings and freedom to shift production have compromised small producers and insecure workers. In addition, large national and transnational businesses have acquired resources and assets cheaply within much of the majority world.
The contradictions are evident in documents around youth policy. The World Bank, for example, wants young people to embrace responsibility and entrepreneurship and to develop their employability. But, in striking echoes of 18th and 19th Century Britain⁴, the World Bank calls for the global extension of migration programmes for temporary and seasonal labour (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008).

**Controlling global movements for equality**

The on-going development of communication systems is frequently presented as the social justice success-story of globalization. Globalized communications have certainly resulted in brief flowerings of movements and activism which aim to disrupt the power structures that support the global market place (Guttal, 2010). However, the new communication technologies which have facilitated these global activists are increasingly run within a corporate framework, interwoven with the power structures that might be a threat.

It is perhaps unsurprising to see the new technologies so clearly in evidence in discussions about new curricula and around the need for an opening up of a global market in education. These corporate players fund and advise many such ventures. As a result a key part of any curriculum now focuses upon the kinds of products these organisations need to sell and, despite calls for the development of critical thinking, reflection and lateral thinking within the curricula documents they help

⁴ Impoverished Irish labour was used for the harvest in England and Scotland. The result was a halving of wages and a lowering in quality of diet for local labour, and increased profits for Anglo-Irish landlords, resulting in widespread rioting in the 1830s.
write\textsuperscript{5}, it is evident that the mechanisms to encourage these outcomes are lacking (Rix, 2010).

Ironically, in embracing new technologies within education, the one aspect of globalization which has created a platform for transformation may increasingly constrain our options to challenge the directions in which those technologies take us. These new channels for seeking equality will be marshalled by those who benefit from the world as it is. Once again, we will “reproduce the culture as it has been.” (Bruner, 1996, p83).

**Diversity**

**Diversity as a restriction**

The recognition of the diverse contexts out of which each of us emerge is a fundamental underpinning tenet of our rights as individuals and members of collective groups, both across and within those cultures (Sen, 1998). It has been the failure to provide this recognition that has led to so many of the human rights movements over the centuries. As a consequence it is possible to find issues of diversity at the heart of many reform agendas.

\textsuperscript{5} For example The Intellectual and Policy Foundations of the 21st Century Skills Framework (2007) published by Partnership for 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Skills. Six of the eight founders of the Partnership work for DELL, Apple, Cisco systems, Aol Time Warner, Cable in the Classroom, and Microsoft, as does one of the key partners, the Appalachian Technology in Education consortium; whilst the other key partner is the US Department of Education. In the list of authors for the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Skills Framework nearly all are from the Media and ICT business community. (Rix, 2010)
Consider for example the development of multicultural education in the United States. Since 1977 the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has included multicultural education as an essential item within its accreditation criteria. From 2000 it had a specific standard on diversity. However, guidance for teacher trainers focuses upon issues related to gender and minority groups; and their courses offer little encouragement to critically engage with the systems and processes in which students will work – systems and processes which palpably continue to discriminate against so many of these individuals (Baltadano, 2006):

Without a strong antihegemonic philosophy to guide its direction, multicultural education’s initial social concerns with racial integration, gender equality, and linguistic difference have gradually degenerated into a checklist of diversity attributes and features, which reified and essentialized notions of difference, ultimately fossilizing the movement.

(p124)

The implication is that what began as a transformative response was appropriated within the status quo; by becoming one more mainstream policy, multiculturalism has been increasingly defined by the priorities of the dominant culture.

Similarly, within the United Kingdom, national policies for raising school standards appear to contradict policies encouraging diversity and inclusion, enhancing instead marginalization and exclusion (Dyson et al., 2003). It is more common for the diversity of students to be seen as a ‘problem’ which needs to be minimized rather than as a resource for learning and inclusion (Booth et al., 1997). Underpinning this
response is a sense of tolerance for difference, something which indicates that the school is part of a respectful, civil society, but which is enduring rather embracing diversity (Nieto, 2010).

The notion of diversity has become the dominant culture, making space for something it has identified as “other”. As has been identified within the Finnish and Norwegian context, there is a tendency amongst teachers, sometimes subtle but at other times open, to homogenise the majority and set up a division between them and the special minority (Arnesen et al., 2007). Such a response is unlikely to be confined to this one profession within the dominant culture.

Diversity has become a notion for managing inequality, a management strategy, a political stance and an economic imperative. As Benn puts it:

If we compare the obligations related to diversity (everyone must be nice to everyone) with those required by equality (some people must give up their wealth), it is easy to understand how commitment to diversity has transformed…into a programme that aims to make rich people with different skin colours or sexual orientations feel “comfortable” without touching the one thing that makes them feel most “comfortable” – money.

(Benn, 2009)

Policy and practice dressed as diversity has opened the doors for a few. Its subsequent apparent openness to these groupings has disguised – and enabled denial of – the underlying inequalities that keep so many others out.
Diversity as selective participation

This capacity of the dominant culture to allow access to a relatively select few outsiders is not just a characteristic of neo-liberal governance; it is a central characteristic of power politics over the ages. Equally, the capacity to widen participation has long been a conception for social transformation. Within the emancipatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire, the participation of the teacher and learner in uncovering the reality of their situation was a fundamental tool for the transformation of social structures which oppress those living in poverty:

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. (Freire, 1970, p47)

The notion of participation is evident across many conventions, policy and legislative documents. However, it has frequently become the pseudo-participation which Freire highlighted as a risk (p51). Young people’s experience in the UK, for example, is that when they do participate not that much changes (Taylor, 2008). Participation is in evidence across health, education and social care, but it is very rare to see that involvement at a strategic level (Oldfield and Fowler, 2004; Franklin and Sloper, 2006). The capacity to create meaningful change is therefore curtailed.

The response for some young people being involved in pseudo-participation will be further disengagement from the processes they were supposed to be participating in. For others however, involvement in relatively surface activities, such as opinion
gathering exercises and peer-training events, will have the effect of producing “Plato’s conformist citizen, content to consume and comment, to be led and represented” rather than “Aristotle’s dissenting citizen, for whom all things are open to question, capable both of governing and being governed” (Taylor, 2008, p256).

At an international level, participation has had its negative impact too, becoming a cover for institutions such as the World Bank to encourage the removal of state control over resources and their placement within the “free” market (Leal, 2010). It has become a tool not just for maintaining the status quo but also for deepening and widening the control of those economic forces which lead to the marginalisation and impoverishment of so many. This has been largely achieved through shifting the focus of participation away from its political goals and towards its techniques, so that the concern becomes which of the diversity groupings have been included, as opposed to the nature of their participation and its transformational outcomes (White, 1996).

**Diversity leading to exclusion**

It is evident that the inclusion of marginalised individuals is under the terms of those with the power to define the nature of their participation. Experiences in Sweden and the US, for example, suggest that the extension of choice within a marketplace, unless very tightly controlled, further excludes the disadvantaged (Bunar, 2010; Söderström and Uusitalo, 2010; Howe and Welner, 2002).

---

6 For example, funding is presented as creating individual choice and community engagement, but is made dependent upon ‘opening up’ of markets in ‘everything’ (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008) which includes all key resources, such as public health, energy, water etc.

---
Within education, inclusion has been compromised by its association with those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Rather than focusing upon how to achieve ‘inclusion for all’, policies have identified who should be the focus of inclusion, based around those groupings and issues associated with diversity (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007).

Policies on inclusion have also been compromised by the range of marketisation policy initiatives. In England, for example, this has included the traditionalist national curriculum, standardised testing, league tables and the investment in and development of a range of independent and alternative provision (Slee, 2006; Rix, 2011), resulting in increasing segregated and selective provision (Rix, 2006; Barron et al., 2007). This has coincided with on-going and disproportionate referral of certain ethnic groupings and social classes to categories for intervention and treatment (Slee, 2008).

Intended as an “assault on oppressive vestiges of the past as a way of contributing to alternative futures” (Slee and Allan, 2001, p176), the term ‘inclusion’ and its underpinning lexicon have become subsumed by those within ‘special’ education (Rix, 2011). It has shifted from being a transformative process to being an option within the overall system. For many, therefore, the freedom to participate and to be included has simply changed the lexicon which leads to their separation.

**Conclusions?**
Are schools part of an underlying contradiction?

Our systems and ways of working can be seen to be part of the problem and this is a major challenge for educationalists. Do we need to recognise (as Illich did) that our schools and universities are in many ways a barrier to transformation and a key driver of inequality? There can be little doubt that the rationale of education is inextricably linked with vested interests. It is fundamentally associated with governance and economically correct notions of advancement.

Greater production is the key to prosperity and peace. And the key to greater production is a wider and more vigorous application of modern scientific and technical knowledge. (President Harry Truman, 1949 cited in Hart, p383)

Education is a key player in delivering ‘new knowledge’, in establishing a technorationalist worldview, in which measurable, standardised practices dominate (Lankshear, 1997). However, one of the paradoxes associated with such a New Work Order (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996), is that newly ‘critical thinking’ workers cannot really question the goals, visions, and values of the education system in which they operate. Teachers in England for example are supposed to help children become self-managers, creative thinkers, independent enquirers, reflective learners, team workers, and effective participators and yet the capacity to achieve these things – for themselves as teachers – is not evident in their training (Rix and Paige-Smith, 2011) nor their ways of working. Can the system allow practitioners genuine freedom in how they support learning and identify the foci of that learning? Is this possible when the system is driven by competitive market forces, and is focused upon economic prosperity and social control (Brown, 1990)?
This inability of established social systems to critically evaluate themselves puts a fundamental break on the transformation of our society. Illich (1970) considered how myths associated with growth restrict the transformative capability of schooling. These myths lead to a belief that development and investment inevitably lead to something of value, producing superior resources and outcomes. He cited the growth of curricula, materials and qualifications (Illich, 1970). Others have identified growth in different areas, for example the growth of special education budgets and categories of disability (Slee, 2008). Yet in perpetuating these myths our schooling system fails to recognise that “growth conceived as open-ended consumption-eternal progress can never lead to maturity” (Illich, p40).

Ironically, too, we risk our notions of our globalized world becoming increasingly insular:

Once people have the idea schooled into them that values can be produced and measured, they tend to accept all kinds of rankings. There is a scale for the development of nations, another for the intelligence of babies, and even progress toward peace can be calculated according to body count. In a schooled world the road to happiness is paved with a consumer’s index. (Illich, 1970, p29)

As the universal principles of equality are increasingly applied to ever more specific categories of diversity, national policies acknowledge an ever wider range of differences between young people (Boyask et al., 2009). This increasing categorisation is part of the process of which Young (1990) warned, leading to an
increasingly subtle impression that there is something natural about our divided society.

**The final result?**

The dominant political and economic model of neoliberalism depends on representing the world in what appears to be new ways, using new discourses and creating new identities, so as to legitimise the market economy, disciplinarian policies and a culture framed around a positive notion of enterprise and choice (Jessop, 2002). In so doing the neoliberal agenda has taken control of all the key conceptual tools developed by the previous generations of activists who were eager to transform the social structures which drive inequality, marginalisation and poverty. These neoliberal policies – including those around Education – have further entrenched the disenfranchisement of the majority of the world whilst claiming to empower us as individuals, free to benefit on an equal basis with everyone else.

The subsuming of these conceptual tools and the language associated with them should not hide from us the nature of the arguments being made, however. These arguments have an extended history, evident from the first justification of rural clearance over 400 years ago. The aim is to separate the yearning for wealth, comfort and power from the plight and desperate actions of the disenfranchised; and to do so despite the two lines of argument being contradictory. The intention is to persuade the populace that it is both natural for the disenfranchised to be in the condition they are in and that it is something for which the disenfranchised or their communities have ultimate responsibility. These are the arguments which envelope
us from our earliest days, wrapping us within the hidden curriculum of our upbringing and everyday lives, shielding us from recognising our complicity and ensuring we resist only slightly the dominance of the minority. The critical issues for the 21st century, therefore are not much different to the critical issues for the last few centuries; they are around how we can genuinely transform an inequitable society against the odds.

**References**


