

Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion in Professional Education

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Introduction

Equality in education pertains to making learning fair and easily accessible to all learners in a learning environment. It entails how to equalise access to participation within different levels of formal education for various social groups (Baker and Lynch, 2005). Equality within a standardized education system will allow students from poor backgrounds to access quality learning resources regarding institutions and teachers. Education needs to be more holistic with an integrated approach to attain equality, meaning that even access to neighborhoods should be a factor as a determinant of quality. In practice, it means that cooperation should be the norm, rather than competition, to make educational establishments a genuinely egalitarian body (Baker& Lynch, 2005). In essence, aiding the student in academics as well as their everyday lives will be of great benefit to the student. Summative assessment is not perceived as the primary focus of education but rather the experience of the student.

This essay will focus on the issue of equality in education and also explore equality-related matters within social – classes in the current education structure while considering government legislation, regulations, and policies. Next, the essay will focus on related literature and the theoretical lens of equality in education. In my conclusion, I will link the issue of fairness in education to my professional practice.

Discussion

Every learning organization produces policies in response to the above legislation, regulation, and treaty. The plans must set out the guidelines and procedures to ensure equality in an educational establishment. Every Educational policy must take into account the rights of all individual students and groups within an Educational establishment. The implementation of equality in education is an issue of utmost importance in the nation, which has long remained unresolved due to social class and capital resources.

This inequality of social class and capital has always left children from the middle class at a disadvantage when compared to the upper-class Children. Despite government promises of giving parents of young children a broader choice in choosing schools for their children, the system does not conform to this ideology in practice. In a speech made to stakeholders in 2005, the then secretary of state for Education, Ruth Kelly, stated that the government needs to do more to address the issue of

inequality in education, which continually leaves certain groups of students at a disadvantage in education. Although that speech was made over a decade ago, the sector has seen minimal change regarding equality. Minority communities and low-income earners continue to face low-quality education compared to other mainstream ethnic groups and the wealthy.

In the UK policy sphere, attention has been focused on determining the causes of the failure of different education strategies for the promotion of socio-economic equality. There are some pieces of legislation that form government statutory codes of practice, school policies, and procedures that advocate for equal opportunity within a learning institution. The Equality Act of 2010 stipulates that it is unlawful to discriminate against learners on the grounds of their age, race, religion, belief, gender reassignment, and disability. This act shows the legal responsibilities of public bodies and teachers in providing an equal learning environment.

Every organization develops policies in response to the legislation, codes of practice, and statutory framework set up by the government in a certain jurisdiction. Every institution must establish ways to promote individual learners' rights and equality of opportunities. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that learners have equal access to the learning curriculum irrespective of their background, race, gender, culture and disability. For example, in ESOL, it is crucial to ensure learners have equal rights at all times by getting them involved in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of activities in their pedagogical approach (Freire, 1970 a).

The question that begs for an answer is how this pedagogical approach can be applied. According to (Freire, 1970 b), equal opportunity does not mean that a teacher should treat every student the same in the learning environment. Instead, a teacher needs to involve the students in a pedagogical teaching approach by considering their past educational experiences, parents' work experiences, ethnicity and cultural background. These characteristics are embedded in the teaching code of conduct and stipulated in the guidelines of the Equality Act of 2010 for professional educators to apply in practice.

The application of equality is crucial in an ESOL learning environment where there are diverse ethnic groups. Getting students involved increases their ability to learn a second language through group work and interacting with each other. It gives the students an opportunity to take control of their learning, rather than a teacher treating them like a bank account, where the teacher deposits and withdraws experiences as they like (Freire. 1970). This view is supported by

Bloom's taxonomy and Freire's models which support learner empowerment to take control of learning. Furthermore, there must be an understanding of their responsibility towards each other. Thus, a good education policy promotes equality and inclusion, delivers a positive learning atmosphere and ensures mutual respect between learners and teachers.

In theory, the Equality Act of 2010 establishes that there should be equality in education and prohibits all forms of discrimination that may hinder unfettered access to learning resources. However, this concept has not been fully implemented in the UK due to educational resources being distributed

unequally and unfairly. In most cases, a learner's family's economic background dictates the quality of education they can access and the neighborhood they can live. Knowledge links to the economic power of society in two ways: firstly, it allows access to education, not considering social class or status, and secondly, it encourages successful participation in the learning process (Reay et al., 2000).

Currently, unfettered access to education in the UK is primarily dependent on a household's income and neighborhood. In a 2007 Ofsted report published in *The Guardian*, the government's chief inspector of schools, Christine Gilbert, categorically indicated that stark socioeconomic and racial lines in the country determine how learners perform in school and the quality of schools that they attend (Curtis, 2007). Although these public schools are funded by the government, the experience and qualifications of teachers and the availability of other resources are dependent on parents' contributions and influence in school financing. Moreover, learning institutions mediate life chances in society because of the unequal distribution of financial resources (Lynch & Baker 2005), which play a significant role in determining the quality of education.

The correlation between social status and education has proven to be problematic for many policymakers over the years. In discussing various countries, some scholars agree that education has "a problem of unequal access, participation, and outcome arising from unequal access to resources" (Ball, 2004; Bowles and Gewirtz, 2002; Gewirtz et al. 1995; Green, 2003; Lynch and O'Riordan 1998). For example, some courses accept lower entry grades from students from low-income families due to their inability to compete with children from high-income households because they enjoy many advantages in their learning process.

Furthermore, cultural barriers play an intricate role in advancing inequality in education in the UK. Ideally, learners from specific cultural groups are barred by non-academic issues from accessing certain colleges and learning institutions (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Inevitably, those who do not fit the profile of educational establishments will also require resources in the form of capital to acquire education. If the learners do not have such wealth, they will experience educational failures, either partially or in totality. Generally, in today's modern society, the correlation between socioeconomic background and the highest level of educational attainment has been robust, which means educational credentials are merely operating in practice, albeit not in principle, but as a kind of state-supported system of inherited privilege (Bourdieu, 1996).

Another factor contributing to the disparity in education is the concept of educational institutions promoting social class inequality. Schools, as organizational entities with their own priorities and values, are mandated by the need for survival and competition with others to maintain a certain concept in society (Baker & Lynch, 2005). Enrollment of students with a given certain socioeconomic background or even neighborhood works towards ensuring the survival of such institutions. These institutions are aware that parents of said students are more likely to invest "time and resources in their children, thereby boosting performance, and correlatively the status of the school" (Baker & Lynch, 2005). These resources can include, but are not limited to, private tutors, extra-curricular

activities, donations, and further reading materials, all of which can be attained with financial means that may not be provided for fully by the government.

Another factor that promotes education inequality in the United Kingdom is the concept of catchment areas. The concept involves limiting the learners that a given institution can enroll depending on the distance between a learner's home and the school. This practice does not allow fairness for middle and low-income households. This is because wealthy families have the resources to move closer to top-performing schools to make their children admissible in such institutions (Gewirtz et al., 1995; Lareau, 1998; Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Reay, 1998). For low-income households, changing an address is not an easy thing as it may be costly, and such homes may not afford to live in expensive neighborhoods that usually have high-performing schools. Where wealthy families do not want to experience the inconvenience of changing addresses for the sake of their children, they can always enroll their children in expensive private schools that are not subjected to the catchment area requirement.

The use of school catchment areas in the educational system creates a bias in the sector and undermines the push for equality in education. This is because the concept, in most cases, disadvantages some children from middle and low-income families when it comes to choosing a school. Some areas, such as Birmingham, have school entrance exam that tends to cream off talents from middle-class families. In a society where the government fails to intervene and offset the adverse effect of choices, children from low-income families will always be seen as failures, whereas in reality, they may be better than their counterparts in the high-income end if they were availed similar opportunities (Cole & Hill 1995; Reay 1996). Nonetheless, current measures to address such disadvantages facing low-income families, such as the pupil premium policy, have not closed the gap well enough, as glaring differences still exist. An evaluation report on the program from the Department of Education shows that the program has achieved considerable success, but schools implement the program in a skewed manner (Carpenter et al., 2013).

The idea of a catchment area systemically discourages students from going to the school of their choice. This questionable practice, undoubtedly will increase fostering systems of advantage and disadvantage within the education structure (Shaun story; Reay 1996). This question begs for an answer on the issue of equality in education, considering the stance of the Equality Act of 2010. A lot that needs to be done in the education sector has not been done.

Ideally, some key pillars of the education system promote bias and inequality. The curricula, syllabi, and mode of assessment that are currently in use in the formal educational system are systematically biased against students who do not excel in linguistic and logical-mathematical capabilities. Take, for instance, ESL speakers who have to learn a new instructional language where the system does not factor in the fact ESL speakers may be disadvantaged compared to native English speakers. Nevertheless, a balanced pedagogical learning environment ought to factor in these issues. In fact, according to Freire (1970), semantic abilities are developed within social classes because of differences in culture, lifestyle, work, and ethnic background. Further research by Arnot and Reay

(2006a; 2006: 2004) shows that a student from a low-income household is at a disadvantage of being excluded indirectly during learning in the classroom. This also applies to students in college and university who work part-time to support their education and some even their families (Skeggs, 2004, p. 189). Thus, with the failure of the current approaches to fill the gap in education inequality, new approaches need to be considered.

First and foremost is a new multi-pronged approach that not only addresses inequality in education but also in other areas among UK citizens. According to Lynch (2005), education needs to be seen as one part of a broader social policy that is pushing for equality across the board. Changing education alone has historically failed to solve the problems that arise due to poverty or inequality in our educational system. As such, it is important that poverty eradication measures and even health improvement programs, among other government initiatives that target low-income households, be merged or reconstituted to take a common approach that acknowledges that poverty has a far-reaching impact on education, health, productivity, and crime, among others.

Incorporating a pedagogical teaching approach that acknowledges social, cultural, and economic differences among learners should be considered. Under such an approach, weaker students will be able to learn from the stronger students, and it will boost cooperation and unity among students. This approach should be done in line with the government's policy, rules and code of conduct, making sure they do not discriminate, harass, or victimize any student because of their age, disability, race, sexual orientation, transgender, or religious beliefs. At the same time, policymakers and teachers, in general, should put in efforts to avoid reverse discrimination. In this case, reverse discrimination would see teachers giving too much attention to minorities and ESOL learners to the disadvantage of learners from mainstream ethnic groups. Individual institutions and instructors should develop unique tactics and strategies for promoting equality in class.

In my professional practice, I deal with a lot of ESOL students who require a dynamic approach. The majority of these students are mature individuals who have acquired prior education experiences and life experiences and are of different ethnic/cultural backgrounds. In my initial diagnostic assessment, I will inquire about their learning needs, find out about their plans, and engage them on initial estimates in the form of placement tests to ascertain their proficiency levels in the English language. Therefore, a teacher must ensure that his/her scheme of work takes into account all students' needs by considering their learning needs and style (Kolb, 1984).

Another effective approach to applying in practice is observing learners' social interaction methods and motivation to maintain an open door policy during learning for college students to share their life experiences. Thus, setting ground rules in the class during learning is very important in ESOL classes. For example, during my teaching practice, I had four students: two females and two males. One of the students spoke English fluently, while the other three students were still below average. Each time I paired them for group exercise, they were not supposed to talk in a different dialect, yet they did. This practice affected their overall performance, forcing me to regroup them. My actions supported one of the ground rules of class interactions: that all communication in class must be in English.

Again, to ensure equality is in place in ESOL classes, a teacher must apply a theoretical lens approach during teaching. Taking into account a student's age, knowledge, and political course can aid in learning and understanding. According to Freire (1970, p-5), "experience showed the relationship between social class and knowledge." My teaching experience of ESOL has exposed me to some of these issues. For example, there was a student in my class who always walked one hour every day to the school. I realized that this student was always sweating, even during the winter period. I inquired why he was always sweating, and he explained that due to his status in the country, his parents could not afford to buy a weekly bus pass for him. Therefore, he has to walk to school. I referred this issue to my supervisor who took up the case and eventually managed to get the college to issue a weekly transport voucher to the student. Although this is not a curricular issue, it is part of the education equality debate. As a teacher, I was able to see through this student's eyes and identify a non-academic issue that may affect a learner's performance in class.

Critical thinking for instructors also comes in handy in pursuing equality in education. Both Giroux and Freire (2006) encourage critical thinking and critical pedagogy in a learning environment, especially where adult learners like ESOL students are involved. This theoretical approach goes a very long way in helping the students to learn through group work and listening to their past educational experiences and life issues. By doing this, a teacher is no longer an oppressor or enabler of an oppressive learning environment (Freire 1970). Instead, the teacher acts as a facilitator in class and promotes a sense of freedom and equality among learners (Freire, 1970 & Vygotsky, 1978).

Critical thinking for instructors should not be confused with the critical race theory. The critical race theory is not an attack on white people but rather a challenge to "the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of white identifications and interests" (Gillborn 2005, p. 488). In practice, the theory, which has been widely popular in the US, takes radical approaches to fighting racism in education. It raises doubt about a significant number of the comforting myths that so-called democratic states tell about themselves. The test stretches out past the domains of strategy making and arrangement execution and ventures into the institute. Specifically, such a viewpoint challenges the sort of 'critical thinking' approach that has come to encapsulate a lot of scholarly work, particularly in the conventions of school adequacy and administration/initiative studies (ibid). Under such a view, it would appear that the UK education system and society at large are racist, and the current inequality situation in education is nothing but just an attribute of such a society.

Nonetheless, critical thinking, in my case, would mean a more conciliatory approach. In practice, I would also adopt the learning process of cultural engagement because most of my students were foreigners or of foreign ancestry. In doing so, I will encourage my students to engage in mainstream British cultural experiences and activities. For example, they should visit local businesses, supermarkets, and cinemas and engage in extra-curricular activities. This approach will enable the students to learn and observe how theoretical learning is applied in real life. Essentially, the only way to promote equality as a teacher is to embrace a pedagogical teaching and learning approach.

Additionally, it is imperative that every child and young person gets access to education easily and

reasonably, which is the aim and objective of equality in education. There are pieces of legislation enacted by the national government from which learning institutions derive their policies. The Department of Education and other agencies, including the Justice Department, regularly enact statutory policies that also affect learning institutions (PSED 2011).

Conclusion

All in all, this article has demonstrated that education inequality is a serious threat to the education of young learners in the UK. Currently, there is inequality in the dimension of resources, and the impact of capital on social class and the effects on children from middle-class families. The current admission policies are very unfair to the economically disadvantaged in the society. Also, the present curriculum, syllabus, and assessment methods need to be overhauled to factor in students from ethnic minorities facing a myriad of challenges. It is important the British people and the government embrace equality unilaterally and be deemed egalitarian in our society. Bridging the gap regarding equality in education within the community might be difficult initially, but with a more diversified initiative that is favorable to middle and low-income families, then the country will truly achieve the values of democracy and demonstrate to the world that, indeed, the UK is a democratic and advanced meritorious society that does not seek to reward the wealthy and people of a certain racial or ethnic background.

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