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The school-based determinants of young peoples' sense of justice

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Background

This paper uses reports from 13,000 grade 9 pupils in six countries to examine issues such as whether they were treated fairly at school, trust their teachers and adults in wider society, are willing to sacrifice teacher attention to help others, and support the cultural integration of recent immigrants. Using such reports as 'outcomes' in a multi-stage regression model, it is clear that they are largely unrelated to school-level variables. To some extent, these outcomes are stratified by pupil and family background. However, the largest association is with pupil experience of interactions with their teachers. Teachers appear to be a major influence on young peoples' sense of justice, and the principles they apply in deciding whether something is fair. The paper concludes by suggesting ways in which schools and teachers could take advantage of this likely 'effect'.

Research Questions

How do pupils' experiences at school shape their enduring concepts of fairness and equity? This paper uses a new large-scale study of pupil reports to look at the principles of justice in school and beyond, as they appear to young people aged 14 or 15, and to examine how individual views are influenced by the (mis)application of these principles by those they interact with.

Methods

The models presented here are derived from logistic regression analysis with binary 'dependent' variables - such as trust in others, help for the disadvantaged, and whether pupils found school fair. In each case, around 50% of pupils were in each category (such as whether they were willing for a pupil with difficulties to receive extra help at their expense or not). And in each case the regression analysis used the other 'independent' variables to predict which category a pupil would have chosen, so increasing the accuracy from near 50% to perhaps 70% or more (so explaining 40% of the residual variation). Independent variables were entered in four blocks representing pupil background (such as parental occupation), aggregated background (e.g. school-level summaries of parental occupation), parental support (such as whether parents talked to children about schooling), and experience of justice at school (such as whether pupils were bullied). Each stage can only take up and try to explain any variation in outcomes that is left unexplained by an earlier stage. The stages represent a rough biographical order, and so protect the analysis from the invalid influence of later proxies (although the models were also run in reverse order and the substantive findings did not change). As with all such models, they do not represent any kind of definitive test but are a way of filtering the results to see potential patterns.

Frame

There are several well-known principles, such as equality of treatment or of outcome, that purport to lay down what is fair (Rawls 1971, Trannoy 1999). But they might be contradictory if applied together in the same domains or settings (Dubet 2006). Any single formal criterion intended to enhance justice will be flawed in the sense that it will tend to lead to injustice in some situations. We might want teachers to discriminate between pupils in terms of talent, learning difficulties, behaviour or effort, but not on the basis of characteristics that are not their responsibility such as sex or ethnicity. Responsibility theory suggests a fair allocation of resources between individuals defined by their 'talent' - for which they are not responsible - and their 'effort' - for which they are (Roemer 1996, Fleurbaey 1996). If we adhere inflexibly to a principle of equality of opportunity, then the likely result in education will be marked inequality of outcomes. If, on the other hand, we seek greater equality of

educational outcomes then we may need to treat individuals unequally from the outset, identifying the most disadvantaged and giving them enhanced (and so unequal) opportunities. Universal principles must be adapted to each specific set of interactions (Boudon 1995).

Do pupils and their teachers comprehend and appreciate the complexity outlined here? There is some evidence that pupils are sensitive to these kinds of complications. Pupils struggling because of inherent weakness or even a temporary problem like mobility or illness are excepted from equal treatment in the view of other pupils. They are 'permitted' greater teacher concern because they are not to blame, in contrast to those showing lack of willingness or interest (Stevens 2009). Young people appear to distinguish between moral judgements of welfare and rights and justice (such as their effect on others), with transgressions which are wrong regardless of any laws, and social conventions (such as expectations and norms), with transgressions which are acceptable if no explicit rules prohibit them (Nucci 2001). Are there differences between countries and educational approaches in the application of principles of fairness in schools? And do these differences influence what pupils regard as fair? We need to ask young people themselves.

Research findings

Young people are influenced by their life at school, and learn to trust others partly as a consequence of how trustworthy others have appeared to be so far in their lives, for example. Experience at school is strongly related to feelings of trust about people more generally. Those for whom school was fair, and their teachers were just, were nearly twice as likely as others to report trusting the government of their country and most people in general. Positive school experiences and relationships with teachers are associated with a lower likelihood of agreeing to violence and deception, whereas negative experiences are linked to the more 'negative' view in traditional terms. These positive experiences are almost exclusively about teachers and the principles of justice that they apply to routine school events like explanation and getting on with pupils. What are the practical implications of results such as these?