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The impact of perceptions of inequalities on attitudes towards fairness and active citizenship

Bryony Hoskins

Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom

Background

The impact of perceptions of inequalities in education on values and behaviour is an undeveloped field of research and what exists is based predominately upon assumptions rather than rigorous analysis.

Research Questions

This paper will present findings from an investigation, on how young people in school in different countries, subjectively evaluate education inequality and what effect this has on their perceptions of fairness and their levels of active citizenship.

Methods

The analysis for this paper will be completed on two surveys, firstly, IEA CIVED survey collected in 28 countries from 14 years old in schools and, secondly, the new data collected as part of the ESRC inequalities project from Denmark, Germany and the UK in 2009/2010 in lower and upper schools. Both surveys contain questions on the perceptions of equality at school for certain cultural and economic groups, their attitudes towards whether this is fair and their engagement in active citizenship.

The development of the scales will be presented along with the results of correlations and regression analysis.

Frame

There are two competing theories of the effects of inequalities on active citizenship. First, that perceiving a high degree of inequalities will influence people to believe it is unjust and that it is necessary to act to change society to make it more equal. This approach, although not always formally articulated as such, forms part of the norm of thinking behind critical pedagogy and Marxists and Feminist approaches where revealing the inequalities within society is considered the first step towards changing attitudes and behaviour. The alternative hypothesis, proposed by Bègue and Hafer (2005) is the just world theory. This approach, based on social psychology, suggests that perceiving a high degree of inequality will influence individuals in the direction of victim blaming and as consequence will reduce their motivation to engage in civil society and political life in particular reduce their motivation to engage in activities to reduce inequality. This theory was used to help to explain the responses of participants in a study to justify the giving of electric shocks to fellow participants (Lerner, 1980) and has been described as a method for individuals to reduce the stress caused by observing major inequalities in societies (Furnham, 2002).

Research findings

The initial results suggest that the Just world theory is supported by the data and that those who perceive high degrees of inequalities are more likely to state that this unequal situation is fair, however, preliminary signs are that this is not effecting their intention to engage. The full results will be presented within the paper and then discussed in the context of policy and practice. The paper will highlight the implications for critical pedagogy and teaching about inequalities and fairness within education.

References

Bègue and Hafer, (2005) Experimental Research on Just-World Theory: Problems, Developments, and Future Challenges. *Psychological Bulletin* Vol. 131, No. 1, 128-167.

Furnham, A. (2001) "Belief in a just world: research progress over the past decade", *Personality and Individual Differences*, 34, 5, 795-817

Lerner, M. (1980) *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion*. New York: Plenum Press, 1980.