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Economic and cultural inequalities: where are we in our understanding?

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Background

Since the 60's inequalities have taken a central position within the study of education. Forty years later the Sociology of Education field is still researching their effects on the educational and personal improvement of students. However, as the discourses of LLL and the need for continuous development in terms of skills and knowledge have recently become dominant for the economy and the labour market, inequalities expressed and faced within educational settings are of significant importance. The negative outcome of inequalities in the educational context has an effect in the overall societal organisation. In this context, this paper will map out the literature in this field, define the key concepts relating to inequalities and their effects and finally develop a framework for the analysis of our inequalities project data.

Research Questions

In this project we attempt to grasp and research the interconnection and interdependency of inequalities within an educational context and the modality of social cohesion in which the latter operates. Specifically, we are looking at both economic and cultural inequalities. Thus, we shall investigate the process of how the individuals develop their perceptions of inequalities within the educational system and attempt to identify the relationship between perceived inequalities and the values and behaviour such as active citizenship that effect socially cohesive societies.

Methods

To that end this paper will review and summarise the existing work on inequalities, citizenship and ethnic composition focusing particularly on their interconnection to modalities of social cohesion. Such a summary includes work in economic inequalities and particularly the notion of class (Savage 2005, Skeggs 2004, 2005, Reay, Ball, Power-Witty, Bernestein Bourdieu, Gerwitz). In terms of cultural inequalities we shall explore the literature related to the cultural turn and the identity politics drawing from the work of Du Bois, Judith Butler, Valerie Hey, Stuart Hall, and finally we shall focus on literature related to social organisation Durkheim, Marx (Althusser as deterministic approach and link with Foucault), Engels, Weber, Jane Jenson, Nancy Fraser and in a more abstract sense Foucault, Rorty and Bauman. Literature on active citizenship and the philosophy of civics (Plato, Socrates, Decard, and Rousseau), political participation and democracy will also be introduced. Moreover, for the contextualisation of the above a country context understanding through historical-comparative approach will be offered.

Frame

The literature will be framed around particular concepts, such as: inequality, class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, values, fairness/unfairness, meritocracy, civic values, social attitudes and behaviour, tolerance and trust.

Finally, we shall introduce three distinct interpretations that can be related to distinct political perspectives/ideologies as a first step towards the interpretation of data.

These can be summarised as follows:

First, the just world theory (Duru Bellet and Keifer, 2008) which highlights how higher levels of perceptions of inequalities lead to victim blaming and consequently feel no obligation towards

reducing the differences. This could lead to a lack of quality of participation including a rise in actions to increase inequalities such as through racially motivated behaviours. It could equally reduce the amount of trust in others.

Second, that individual see that the world is unequal and unfair but feel unable to do anything about it either for themselves if they experience inequalities or towards others. This could be as a result of trying to make changes at school, college, university or local community and experiencing barriers.

Third, that the individual sees some inequalities in life but when they experience this towards themselves and or others they feel able to make changes and regularly participate in doing this.

Research findings

The complexity of the task demands not only of interdisciplinary work but most importantly of within-disciplines work. Thus, on the one hand we shall attempt to bring forth the interdisciplinary understandings for the exploration and description of our empirical outcomes. We shall draw particularly from sociology and political science, anthropology, psychology and economics. On the other, the within-disciplines work - and I shall consider this the trickiest - will attempt to overcome, merge or collide between the ontological differentiations to an epistemological framework that could offer a descriptive language for their analysis and understanding.

The final outcome of this theoretical exercise would be a descriptive language for the analysis of the primary qualitative data of our project.

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