

Social Justice In Education

Why Does This Issue Matter?

To many people, questions about education and questions about social justice belong in separate baskets. Education concerns schools, colleges and universities, whose business is to pass knowledge on to the next generation. Social justice is about income, employment, pensions or physical assets like housing. Governments have separate departments for them, and so should our minds. The schools have no business getting mixed up with welfare; their job is to teach.

It is easier to believe in this separation if you are yourself well-paid and well-educated. People who are poor and who have been ill-educated have been raising questions for a long time about the connection: about who the education system is actually serving, and why it seems closed or indifferent to the likes of them.

I think these questions are valid and important, not only for the disadvantaged. There are, it seems to me, three key reasons why the issue of social justice matters for everyone connected with the school system — teachers, parents, pupils and administrators alike.

(1) The education system is a major public asset. It is one of the largest industries in any modern economy; it is one of the largest public undertakings. In Canada, for instance, public

expenditure on education runs at \$54,170,406,000 per year (1991–92); not a cottage industry.¹ In many communities, especially working-class communities, the public schools are the largest institutions around, and the most important centres of neighbourhood activity.

Teachers, harassed with demands and fighting budget cuts, and seeing little immediate return from much of their work (since education is a slow, long-term process), easily forget this. But schools *are* major social institutions, they have weight in the world. It is not just election-year rhetoric to say that it does matter to society as a whole how schools work, and how well they work.

Given the scale of this public asset, who gets its benefits is a serious question. And there is an immediate reason for asking about social justice. Educational institutions themselves have a shape that shows an unequal distribution of benefits. Western-style education systems have a pyramid shape. As you get closer to the top of the system, fewer and fewer people are there to get the benefits.

(The pyramid narrows sooner in poor countries, where most people are lucky to get a full elementary education. In the richest countries, the institutional narrowing is most noticeable at the tertiary level. Thus if we look at education on a world scale, there is a pyramid of pyramids.)

This immediately means an unequal distribution of the resource represented by formal education. Some idea of the scale of this inequality is given by adding up the public costs of educating young people who leave the system at different levels. An Australian comparison showed the (current-dollar) public expenditure on the schooling of a youth who left high school after year 9 to be \$33 600, while the amount spent on an age-mate who left after a four-year chemistry degree was \$79 800.² These are only indicative figures, but they do point to the order of magnitude involved.

Who gets to the upper levels of the pyramid? Social researchers have compiled abundant evidence about this, documenting how retention rates in secondary schooling, access to higher education, or other educational 'outcomes,' differ between social classes, regions, ethnic groups. Figure 1 shows

one example, from literally hundreds that could be shown. The contours vary from place to place, and from time to time, but the underlying fact remains. There is massive evidence of inequalities in chances of benefiting from the upper levels of education, depending on social background.

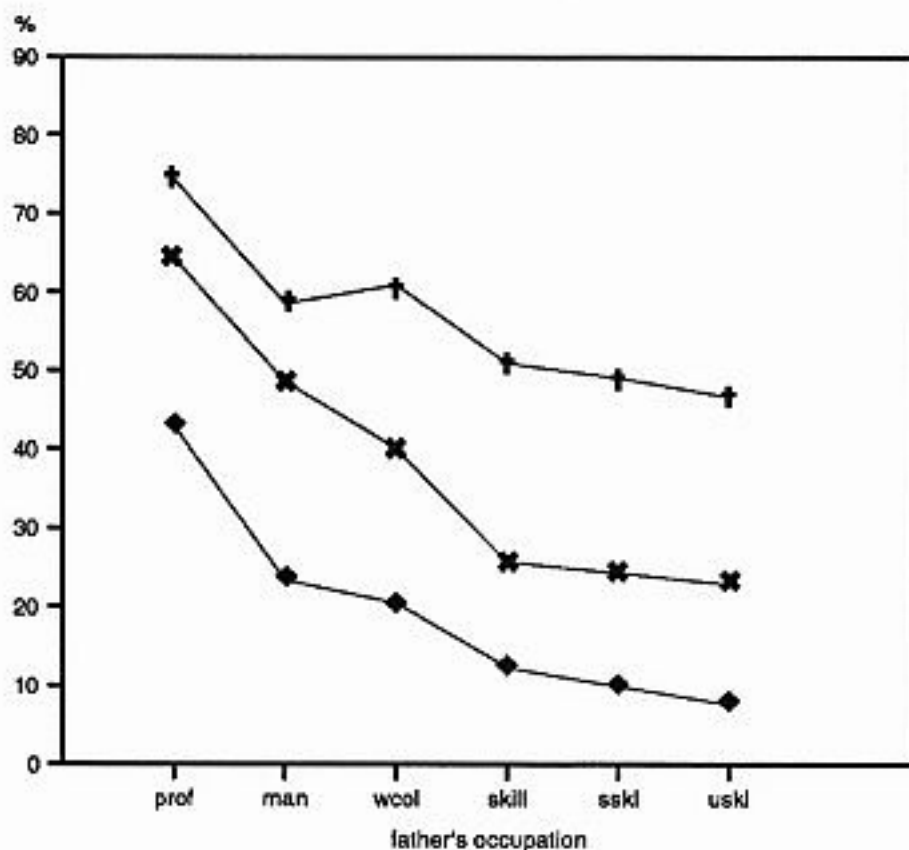


Figure 1.

Social class (index: father's occupation) and some educational outcomes: entry to post-secondary courses, completion of year 12 secondary schooling, and entry to higher education in Australia. Source: T. Williams, *Participation in Education*, Melbourne, ACER, 1987.

So, despite the great expansion of the education system in the last two generations, the results have been lopsided in terms of social access. It is common, in studies like those in Figure 1, for children from the most advantaged groups to show two to four times the rate of entry to higher education that children of least advantaged groups have. To give a Canadian example: in an analysis of 1981 Ontario census data, Paul Anisef found that the percentage of young women (aged 18–21) who were at university ranged from 44.4 per cent for those whose fathers had a

university degree, down to 10.3 per cent for those whose fathers had only elementary education; for young men the corresponding figures were 39.9 per cent and 8.7 per cent.³ That is the scale of inequality, even in large aggregate figures. The position for particular minorities, such as Australian Aboriginal children, is worse.

(2) Not only is the education system a major public asset now — it is likely to become more important in future.

Many economic and social commentators have argued that education is becoming more important as an asset in the late twentieth century. Organized knowledge has certainly become a more important component of the production system. I am writing this in California not far from 'Silicon Valley,' the centre of the U.S. computer industry. Information industries, based on the education system and its capacities for research and training, are now key determinants of economic growth or decline.

So it is not accidental that we hear so much talk at present about the economic uses of education: labour productivity, skills formation, support for advanced technology. But the point is broader than simply technical education. More and more jobs in all kinds of fields have become credentialed. It is a long time since you could become a doctor without having a medical degree, and that 'professional' model is spreading. As new degree programs multiply in human kinetics, leisure studies, business administration, etc., it becomes more and more difficult to get a job as a sports coach, camp administrator, company manager, etc., without the corresponding degree. The education system becomes more and more important as a gate-keeper.

The education system, then, not only distributes current social assets. It also shapes the kind of society that is coming into being. Whether our future society is a just one depends, in part, on the use we make of the education system now.

(3) My third point is about what it is to *educate*. Teaching has been described as a 'moral trade,' and I think this is profoundly true. Teaching and learning, as social practices, *always* involve questions about purposes and criteria for action (whether those purposes are shared or not), about the applica-