
Education in a World Wracked by Crisis^[1]

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ABSTRACT The author argues that there have been major challenges to, and changes in, the role that education now plays in societies around the world. Pointing to growing social inequalities in countries like the USA and Europe, she explores the dynamics that have given rise to these education inequalities through a critical focus on five crises. She concludes by calling for imagination about how to develop a very different kind of society through more socially-just institutions.

In the opening pages of a well-thumbed text for sociologists of education, *Schooling and Work in the Democratic State*, Stanford University professors Martin Carnoy and Henk Levin (1985) argued that education could ameliorate wider inequalities in US society:

Schools and workplaces are organised in ways that correspond closely. Both are large, bureaucratic, impersonal, and hierarchical and routinized ... And yet for all of their correspondences, schools differ from workplaces in at least one important respect. Even though American education is marked by great inequalities, schools do more than other institutions in the way of providing equal opportunities for participation and rewards ... In short, schooling tends to be distributed more equally than capital, income and employment status. (p. 1)

Thirty years on, the story is very different. The USA and the UK have both become more unequal in the distribution of wealth and income. We face a series of crises – economic, political and cultural – that promise to deliver a future that the next generation do not deserve.

Can the solution still be education? The answer is yes, but only if we confront the causes of the crises facing our education systems and put a strong

case for a very different future. Education systems across Europe, and especially in the UK, face five crises.

The first is a crisis of *neoliberal capitalism*. Where neoliberal policies are in place (favouring privatisation, liberalisation and tax cuts for the wealthy), countries have become more unequal. As Warren Buffett – the fourth richest person in the world, with an estimated wealth of US \$44bn – stated, ‘There’s class warfare alright, but it is my class, the rich class that’s making war. And we’re winning’ (Stein, 2006). This growth in inequality is quite shocking. The top 1% has almost doubled its share of the wealth since the 1950s, and 85 people in the world now own as much as the poorest half of the population. What could we do with such wealth? The wealthy individuals featured in the Sunday Times Rich List were worth £519 billion in 2014. This would pay for 5.9 years of education in the UK, 3.7 years of state pensions or 4.2 years of public health.

Second, there is a crisis in the *governance model of education*. Policies that favour school choice and individualism exacerbate social inequalities: the worst of the outcomes fall squarely on the shoulders of the poorest segments of the population, who cannot choose or whose resources limit their choices.

Third, there is a crisis in *social mobility*. The next generation is likely to be in a worse, not better, position than their parents. They are bearing the full brunt of neoliberal policies. When Occupy and other protest groups state, ‘We are the 99 percent’, they are making their voices heard regarding policies that have systematically produced inequalities in our societies.

Fourth, there is a crisis of *graduate employment*. In countries like Spain and Greece graduate unemployment is around 50%. In the UK, graduate unemployment and under-employment undermines the promise of ‘work hard and you will get a good job’ or ‘take out a loan and invest in your future’.

Fifth, there is a crisis of *imagination* about *what kind of education* we might have, and for *what kind of future*. This is why the National Union of Teachers’ manifesto for education is so important. The solution must be in education, but it will require us to confront more squarely the causes of the crisis. Education and teacher activism will also need to promote a very different kind of education system, one that could act as the kind of ameliorative force Carnoy and Levin described.

This must be an act of class warfare with the full weight of a different, more imaginative, challenging and socially just agenda that confronts the failure of governments to challenge the vested interests of a small, wealthy elite.

Note

[1] This article first appeared on the website www.reclaimingschools.org

Reference

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Further Reading

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