

# Comprehensive education

## Ideology and wider socialist and Marxist education policy

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### **Abstract**

There are lines of demarcation between the political left and right, and also within the left, as regards central matters of education policy and how the purpose and value of education may be understood. This article details and distinguishes what is at stake, in particular between a revolutionary Marxist left and other currents, as regards a series of fundamental questions raised by the call for comprehensive education.

**Keywords:** Comprehensive education; Marxist educators; reproduction Marxist; resistance theory

### **Socialist and Marxist education policies**

Broadly speaking, there are three major perspectives, policy directions, regarding formal education: education to conform, education to/for reform, or education to transform – respectively conservative, social democratic/democratic socialist and Marxist.

Conservatives want an education for *conformity*, ('centrist') social democrats want to *reform* education (to make it a bit fairer, more meritocratic, with some positive discrimination), while more left, democratic socialists also want to reform education to make education *much* fairer, with pronounced positive discrimination to help 'underachieving groups'. Revolutionary Marxists, that is to say, Marxists who wish to replace capitalism with socialism, want an education critical of capitalism, an education for social, political and economic *transformation* into a socialist economy and society. My own writing, much of which is online at <http://www.ieps.org.uk/publications/online-papers-dave-hill/>, is from a revolutionary Marxist perspective; I argue for a Marxist education policy (e.g. Hill, 2010, 2015, 2019). In this article I focus on Marxist education, differentiating it from 'centrist' social democratic, and left social democratic or 'democratic socialist', education policy.

### **Social democrats, democratic socialists and education**

Social democrats pursue and enact policies intended to make the system more 'meritocratic'. They do so in two main ways. First with 'equal opportunities' policies involving positive discrimination for under-represented groups, in particular, the poorer sections of the working class and particular ethnic groups. And second, with academic

and scholastic advancement and future positions in the labour market resulting from 'effort plus ability', that is, merit. The aim is to facilitate entry into what is a grossly unequal society.

However, sociologists of education over the last seventy years, and communists and socialists since before then, and, more recently, Stephen Ball, Jean Anyon and Diane Reay, have pointed out the enduring myth of meritocracy in schooling systems. And Marxist reproduction theorists – from early Soviet writers Bukharin and Preobrazensky (1922/1969) to contemporary Marxist theorists such as Glenn Rikowski and Dave Hill drawing to an extent on Bowles and Gintis, Bourdieu, Althusser and Anyon – have for many decades pointed out that the education system is purposefully and intentionally rigged in favour of the elite capitalist class and of class reproduction.

Marxist theorists (and activists), together with social-democratic theorists and activists, also argue that within the working class (defined in Marxist terms [see note 1]), the 'middle class' strata secure 'positional advantage' – the 'better schools and universities' (better grades/exam results) as compared to the less advantaged, poorer, 'working-class' strata. Within these strata, particular racialised ethnic and gendered groups achieve less than others and are subjected to far greater levels of oppression – racism, sexism, homophobia – than other groups.

Traditional social-democratic education systems are those such as in Sweden and Finland, and that which resulted from the reforms of the Wilson Labour government in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s. Wilson widely (if not universally in the state system – private schools remained outside the state system) established comprehensive/common schooling, and grants to help children from poorer families stay on at school, and grants ('maintenance grants') to go to university, in an attempt at 'compensatory education'. Policies such as smaller class sizes for the lower attainers, and residential education centres, and 'cultural trips' were widespread. At the post-school level, free adult education was ubiquitous for leisure as well as vocational 'further education', and the Open University was set up whereby people from working-class backgrounds who had left school at the minimum school-leaving age, or at the age of eighteen/nineteen, could study for a degree (primarily by distance learning) while still at work.

At various stages in various countries, all types of socialists attempted, at various times, to make the schooling curriculum more inclusive, and 'relevant' to different communities and classes. The community schools movement, particularly strong between the 1970s and the 1990s, attempted to make schools more central to local communities, by developing community schools to 'lessen the distance' between schools and their working-class communities. The community schools movement sought to obliterate the boundary between school and community, to turn the community into a school and the school into a community. As did the much-overlooked 'Hargreaves Report' into secondary education in the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA, 1984; DoE, 1984).

Such social-democratic reforms, though usually focusing on pedagogy and curriculum, were advanced by very many critical pedagogues, such as Henry Giroux, and also by ‘Marxian’ educators’ such as Michael W. Apple, Ken Saltman and Ken McGrew, who are not Marxist, but can be considered to be democratic socialist, wishing teachers to be ‘transformative intellectuals’ seeking a fairer society. Such left social democrats, or democratic socialists, want *substantial* reform of the wider economic, penal, political, welfare systems, and in education, more equal chances (relating, for example to provision, funding, attainment).

What they do *not* want is Marxist revolution: the replacement of capitalism and capitalist education by socialism. For a discussion between Marxist educators and ‘Marxian’ educators, who I typify as left social democrats/democratic socialist, see Kelsh and Hill (2006) and Apple (2006).

These two types of Marxist can be termed ‘reproduction Marxists’ and ‘resistance theory Marxists’. These can approximate to what Anyon labels as ‘traditional Marxist’ and ‘neo-Marxist’, and to what I term ‘Marxist’ and ‘Marxian’, or ‘structuralist Marxist’ and ‘culturalist Marxist’.

Reproduction Marxists can be approximated to structuralist Marxists, seeing the iron fist of capital and its structures severely limiting resistant ‘agency’, punishing, restricting, illegalising, dismissing, for example, trade union and left political activists, and, their left, anti-capitalist beliefs. The current Conservative government is seeking to expel or prohibit anti-capitalist and Marxist subject matter from the curriculum. In September 2020, schools in England were told by the Department for Education not to use material from anti-capitalist groups, with anti-capitalism categorised as an ‘extreme political stance’ equivalent to endorsing illegal activity. Left-wing Labour MP John McDonnell responded, saying: ‘On this basis it will be illegal to refer to large tracts of British history and politics including the history of British socialism, the Labour Party and trade unionism, all of which have at different times advocated the abolition of capitalism’. It is an attempt at thought control.

On the other hand, there are resistance theory Marxists – drawing from Gramsci and who may be termed culturalist Marxists – who see greater space for the autonomy of individuals, groups and institutions/organisation (such as schools) to engage in resistant practices, and anti-hegemonic praxis. Pedagogy and curriculum now are far more strictly controlled than prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act. And, in teacher education, the curriculum is now heavily controlled by dint of ‘standards’, becoming a de-theorised, de-critiqued curriculum.

In praxis, there is a dialectical relationship between the two types of theorist. Reproduction theorists are very often activists in anti-neo-liberal/anti-conservative activism inside and outside the classroom, aware of Marx’s dictum that ‘philosophers have only interpreted the world. The point is to change it’ (Marx, 1845/2002). Resistance

theorists are only too aware of the structural impediments and prohibitions and sanctions against their resistant actions in school.

## **Marxist education**

Revolutionary Marxists – Marxists who are anti-capitalist and wish to see capitalism replaced by socialism – want an education system that is not only ‘free’ (of fees) from early childhood through life, but is a system with well-trained educated teachers who are well-paid and valued in society, with a Marxist school and higher/university education curriculum that exposes capitalism and inequalities, argues for socialism, and values solidaristic as opposed to competitive individualistic school activities. In a Marxist education system, all schools and universities, including private ones, would be brought under local accountable democratic control.

In contrast to the writing of many more liberal, or ‘reformist’, or social democratic critical pedagogues, these revolutionary critical pedagogues (some would simply describe themselves as Marxist or communist educators), such as Grant Banfield, Peter McLaren (2013), Ramin Farahmandpur, Glenn Rikowski, Mike Cole, Paula Allman, Deborah Kelsh, Dave Hill, Ravi Kumar, Kevin Harris, Derek Ford and Curry Malott, *are* Marxist, and do want to see not simply a fairer society, but to go beyond capitalism into socialism.

## **The questions Marxist educators ask**

In schools, colleges and universities, many radical and Marxist critical educators try, in addition to seeking dramatic increases in funding, to affect five aspects of learning and teaching, asking questions about (at least) five aspects of education. These relate to: curriculum and assessment; pedagogy; the organisational culture within the school/institution; organisation of the education system and of students, that is, comprehensive schooling or selective schooling; and ownership and control of schools, colleges and universities.

These questions are common to many types of radical educator, from liberals to social democrats and democratic socialists, not simply to Marxists. Below, therefore, I add what is *specifically Marxist* about these four aspects of education policy and praxis (see Hill, 2019).

### ***Curriculum and assessment***

A first question Marxist and other critical educators ask is what should be in the *curriculum*? A related question is, ‘who should decide?’. Should the curriculum be a curriculum for conformity – to create conformist and dutiful workers and citizens, devoid of ‘deep critique’ (of existing society for example)? Should it be ‘a white, male,

middle-class curriculum', uninfluenced by decolonisation theory, Black Lives Matter, or feminisms such as Titi Bhattacharya's *social reproduction theory*? Or, as Marxists propose and practice, should it be a curriculum for reform and revolution, where curriculum areas/subjects (or cross-disciplinary projects/themes) focus on inequalities, resistance, transformation, the collective good not individualistic consumerism, environmentalism not capitalist ecocide? Thus, school geography would include a focus on social geography, science on the social implications of science, and history and literature and the arts would encompass (white/black, male/female) working-class history and novels/plays exposing ('race', gender, social class, for example) injustice and promoting socialism and communism. The curriculum would be decolonised and revolutionised. It would be anti-racist, anti-sexist, environmentalist, Marxist. (It would also develop subject-specific concepts, skills and knowledge.)

Marxist educators, indeed critical educators in general, can, with students, look at the curriculum and ask, 'What do you/we think should be in the curriculum that is currently absent?'. 'Who do you think benefits and who loses from this curriculum?'. 'Is there a different version or view of the past, the present, or the future?'. What 'messages' come from this curriculum, about, for example, power, protest, individualism, collectivity/collectivism, Black Lives Matter, Generation X and environmentalism, sexism and misogyny, sexuality, and class oppression and exploitation ... ? Where Marxists and revolutionary-critical educators differ from more social-democratic, democratic-socialist and liberal-critical educators is in the emphasis placed on resistance, activism and socialist transformation – and on social-class analysis.

As regards assessment, what is assessed is usually what teachers focus on. It can be restricted to subject knowledge and skills, or it can go more widely. The (social-democratic) Hargreaves Report (op. cit.), for example, proposed that indices of pupil achievement include not only exam results but also pupils' achievements in areas such as problem-solving, personal and social skills, and motivation and commitment. Furthermore, it recommended that pupils/students be given a real say in school policies such as the curriculum and exams.

### *Pedagogy*

Many Marxist (and other critical) educators question the overwhelming teacher-centred *pedagogy*, that pattern of teaching and learning relationships and interaction which Freire termed 'the banking model' of education. Instead, using Freirean perspectives and praxis, they try to use democratic-participative pedagogy which can break down, to some extent, patterns of domination and submission, and which is a pedagogy that listens to children's, students' and local communities' voices. This is a pedagogy that bases teaching and learning on the concerns and issues in everyday life. Furthermore, it is a collaboration between teachers and students, teachers and pupils. Here, learning

is collaborative, not individualistic and competitive. It is a pedagogic system – a pattern of learning and teaching relationships – that is collective, collaborative and mutually supportive.

In addition to ‘democratic-participative-collaborative pedagogy’, critical Marxist educators use different types of pedagogy in teaching, to engage in non-hierarchical, democratic, participative teaching and research. In England, pedagogy in primary (elementary) school teaching has become removed, to an extent, from the control of teachers. Following the 1998 national literacy strategy (NLS), a specific teaching and learning strategy was advised, and was surveilled and inspected for more than a decade, its prescriptions still felt. Across the subject curriculum, lessons followed a standard four-part pattern – introduction, lecture/explanation/teacher teaching, pupil/student discussion/work, plenary. No room for Freirean, Vygotskian, or liberal-progressive child-centred teaching and learning, no room for the ‘dead cat flying through the window’ syndrome, whereby teachers and pupils/students could seize upon a happening event, to explore.

Of course, critiques of over-dominant teacher-centred pedagogy are not restricted to Marxist educators. They are also made by liberal-progressive, child/student-centred educators, anarchist educators and by some conservative educators, concerned about teaching effectiveness and preparation for the workplace. And, following Gramsci, Marxist teachers, by virtue of their social and ideological *role* in actually teaching, in actually carrying out the role of teacher, should maintain an authoritative stance where appropriate. There is room for class teaching and lectures as well as dialogic and discussion-based learning, and learning based on an individual’s or a community’s needs.

Marxist educators differ between themselves, of course (as do conservative educators) on the degree to which education is or should be proselytising, for example, praising ‘the revolution’, and the degree to which it is or should be ‘critical’ – (including ‘auto-critique’) criticising/critiquing not just capitalism and inequality, but also the current and alternative ideologies, policies and praxis. There is a spectrum across different times and places from authoritarian to democratic pedagogy, from some communist states in particular periods, to some insurgent movements.

My own revolutionary Marxist analysis and praxis attempts a synthesis of Vygotskian, Freirean and Gramscian pedagogy. My own early praxis as a young schoolteacher at Stockwell Manor Comprehensive School in Inner London was undertaken during the relatively liberal-progressive, child-centred period of education in England of the late 1960s and early 1970s – before James Callaghan’s Ruskin College speech of 1976 started the process of yanking back education into fulfilling primarily economic and vocational aims, a process carried to fruition and completion during the Thatcher and Major governments of 1979-87. The sheer hatred manifested in that time of both liberal-progressive teaching and attempts at socialist-egalitarian critical education is described

in books by Ken Jones, Clyde Chitty and in my own writing.

### *The organisational culture within the school/institution*

A third question for education relates to the social relations and power relations between management and shop-floor education workers. That is, between the school/university head, principal, director and the teachers and lecturers (and ancillary staff). It also concerns the 'hidden curriculum' of head teacher-teacher-pupil/student relationships, demands and expectations.

In a nutshell, is the school culture democratic and collegiate, or is it dictatorial and authoritarian? This also relates to the pay differences between those at the top and those in the classroom. Prior to the diversification of state education into city technology colleges, academies, free schools and so on, teachers and head teachers were employed by local education authorities, the democratically elected local councils. There were *national* pay scales, no individual pay bargaining and seeking performance-related pay, and no head teachers earning far more than the prime minister, as is the case with some head teachers of academies and directors of academy chains. As with other sectors of the quasi- and part-state provision, and with new public managerialism, the difference in pay and emoluments between those at the top and the shop-floor workers such as teacher and lecturers has ballooned.

Globally, and in the UK, where neo-liberalism has triumphed in education, common results have been the increased casualisation of academic labour, increased proletarianisation, increased pay and conditions differentials within education sectors, cuts in the wages/salaries (and also in 'the social wage' of state benefits and rights), payment by results/performance-related pay, cuts to school and further and higher education budgets, increased intensification of labour, with larger classes, decreased autonomy for school and college teachers over curriculum and pedagogy, being subject to the surveillance and rigors of 'new public managerialism' increased levels of monitoring and report-writing, and accompanying increased levels of stress, increased concern with timekeeping, and tighter and more punitive discipline codes. There has been the terror of the 'teaching walks' by principals/head teachers and members of the senior management teams, who are able to walk into any lesson and observe for as long as they want. There is also the curtailment of trade union rights, and attacks on trade unions as organisations that defend and promote working-class interests.

All this is a far cry from the occasional more collegiate approach to school democracy and management of the more 'progressive', and in some schools, more socialist management. In some schools of the mid-1980s, the whole teaching staff would sit round to discuss school policy, such as the adoption of reading schemes, and the head teacher would act more as a chairperson than a dictator.

Part of this proletarianisation has been an increased level of identification by teachers

and their main unions, such as the National Education Union in England and Wales, and ‘education professionals’, with the working-class movement, workers’ struggle, and industrial action. That is, by increased working-class consciousness.

The managerialist school culture is also a far cry from a key feature of the Hargreaves Report (op. cit.) which was to give pupils a say in the running of the school, with, for example, school councils having powers not just over trivia, such as lavatories, food and litter, but also on issues such as school hours and extracurricular activities, as well as in relation to the curriculum, assessment and exams, to give pupils/students experience of democratic procedures.

### ***Organisation of students and of the education system***

A fourth question in education that critical and Marxist educators can and should ask is about *organisation of the students*. How should children of different social classes, gender and ethnic backgrounds be organised within classrooms, within institutions such as schools and universities, and within national education systems?

Marxists prefer and work for what in Britain is called ‘comprehensive schools’ and in India ‘the common school’. Socialists of various types argue that school should be a microcosm of society, that each school should contain a mixture of children/students from the different social classes and social class strata, and a mix of attainment levels. That is, children/students should not be divided by selection into ‘high achievers’ and ‘low achievers’, or by social class. Furthermore, they should not be divided by wealth/income– so there should be no private schools or universities, as noted below. No moneyed or relatively well-off sections of the population should be able to buy educational advantage, and thereby disadvantage others. It costs as much per week to put a child through Eton as many families have to live on in a week.

Under the academic results-based ‘league table’ competitive marketisation of schools, children/students as young as four are ‘ability grouped’ by table or by ‘stream’/class. This is very different from the mixed-ability organisation of many schools in the 1960s to 1980s, and very different from the proposals of the Hargreaves Report (op. cit.) and the Thomas Reports into primary and secondary education in the Inner London Education Authority.

### ***Ownership, control and management of schools and colleges and universities***

A fourth question revolutionary Marxists pose is ‘who should own, control and govern schools, further education (vocational) colleges and universities? Should it be ‘the people’? Local councils/municipalities? Speculators and hedge funds? Churches and mosques?’

Revolutionary Marxist educators (and others, of course) believe that schools, colleges and universities should be run democratically, with education workers and students, as



well as elected representatives of local communities, having powers in and over those education institutions, within a secular, democratic national framework. There should be no private control of schools, colleges or universities, either by private companies/shareholders, religious organisations or private individuals. Commodification and marketisation in education must end. Thus, there should be no ‘academies’ in England, no ‘charter schools’, whether ‘not-for-profit’ or ‘for profit’ in the USA. (For attempts to address these various aspects of education, in developing a socialist policy for education, see, Hill, 2010; 2013; 2015; 2019.)

### **What is specifically Marxist about these policy proposals?**

What defines Marxists is first, the belief that *reforms are not sustainable under capitalism*, they are stripped away when there are the (recurrent and systemic) crises of capital, such as the 1930s, 1970s, and currently, post-2008, and as they are likely to be post-Covid-19 (for example with pay cuts, union rights, social budgets under renewed threat). The second point of difference between Marxist and non-Marxist socialists is that in order to replace capitalism, Marxists have to actually work to organise for that movement, for that action. Thus, a duty as a revolutionary Marxist teacher is as an *activist*, and a recognition that political organisation, programme development, intervention are necessary. *What is needed is a revolution* to replace, to get rid of, the capitalist economic system.

The third difference is an understanding of the *salience of class* as compared with other forms of structural oppression and discrimination and inequality. Marxists go further than criticising (and acting against) social discrimination, oppressions, for example of sexism, homophobia, racism, into economic rights, and into the recognition that full economic rights cannot be achieved under a capitalist economic system, but only under a socialist or communist system. Formal and informal curricula should teach Marxist analysis of society, its class-based nature or, in theoretical terms, the labour-capital relation. The aim is to develop class consciousness, or, as Marx put it, to enhance awareness of the working class as a ‘class for itself’, not simply a ‘class in itself’. What Gramsci called ‘good sense’, as opposed to ‘common sense’.

These are three points of difference between Marxists and other socialists, between what is Marxist and what is not (Hill, 2019).

### **Note**

1. The two contrasting definitions of (and explanations for) social class categorisation, are these: first, Weberian-derived definitions, and, second, Marxist definitions. Weberian-derived definitions are based substantially on lifestyle, consumption patterns. They offer a hybrid definition grounded in educational

status, income and wealth, power in society, what you consume and where you live. This type of definition is 'gradational'. People are graded in terms of social status. Such gradational classifications are used by advertising agencies, market-research bureaux, and government statisticians, for example, in the Census returns and analysis by the Office for National Statistics, in the UK.

Marxist definitions are not 'gradational' but 'relational'. They are based on an individual's or a family's relationship to the means of production. Do you own the factory, warehouse, shop, farm, sales company, call-centre you work in, or are you employed by the owner, the capitalist or the main shareholders? That is, do you sell your labour power – your work time, skills and aptitudes – to a boss or bosses and hence to capitalists, who make a profit from the surplus value that your labour produces?

So, there are, basically, in Marxist class analysis, two classes, bourgeoisie and proletariat – those who employ and profit from the labour of the labourers and the working class, those of us who sell our labour to a capitalist, or to state institutions that keep the labour supply, the profit supply, trained/educated and healthy. Within Marx's own writings, and within Marxist sociology, such as that of Erik Olin Wright, there are attempts to account for the existence of the 'old middle class'/the petit bourgeoisie and the new middle class (of 'professional' workers, for example), and of an 'underclass', or lumpenproletariat. However, the basic distinction between the capitalist and the worker is this, do you sell your labour (whether you are a checkout operator or dentist or manager) or do you purchase that labour; are you 'the boss', or one of the 'bosses' owning the particular production, marketing, distribution process? See Hill (2018) for a brief discussion, and Kelsh and Hill (2006) for a detailed discussion.

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