Critical, transformative education for economic and social justice

Dave Hill suggests a manifesto for schooling and teacher education for economic and social justice which calls for transformative change throughout teacher education, schooling and the wider social context.

Critical teacher education

Education has some potential to fuel the flames of resistance to global capitalism as well as the passion for egalitarian transformation.

The neo-liberal project for education is part of the bigger picture of the neo-liberal project of global capitalism. Markets in education world-wide, so-called ‘parental choice’ of a diverse range of schools, (in reality, a mechanism for schools selecting children), and fees for education are only part of the education strategy of the national and multinational capitalist class. Capital has a Business Plan for Education. This is what it requires education to do – produce labour power with the skills and ideologically compliant attitudes to develop a workforce from which surplus value can be extracted. It also has a Business Plan in Education. This is how it plans to make profits out of education (Hill, 2003). One of the major current purposes of the education policies of governments such as those led by President Bush and by PM Tony Blair is ‘to make the world safe for global capitalism.’

The success of this project in education worldwide has been scarcely contested (though the Zapatistas, the Movimento Sem Terra, and the isolated effects of Critical Pedagogy and critical pedagogues such as Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, are examples). It has rendered the social democratic (and the sometimes contradictory liberal-progressive) content and objectives of much of schooling and initial teacher education in England and Wales, for example, almost unrecognizable, compared to the goals of ‘a fairer society’ in the postwar period in much of the industrialised capitalist world, and compared to the child-centred/student-centred pedagogies and curricula of the 1960s and 1970s. Then, prior to the crisis of capital accumulation and the declining rate of profit which followed the ‘Oil Crisis’ and rises in some raw material costs, there was, in many governments and educational state institutions in Western Europe and North America, a real, if limited, commitment to issues of equality.

Detheorized schooling and teacher education

The restructuring of education is taking place globally with the influence of world capitalist organisations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and regional organisations such as PREAL in Latin America and the European Union institutions operating in Eastern Europe. One key aspect of the restructuring has been widescale detheorization of initial teacher education (ITE). Since the Conservative Government introduced new regulations for teacher training and education in 1992/1993 (for England and Wales), ‘how to’ has replaced ‘why to’ in a technicist curriculum based on ‘delivery’ of a quietist and overwhelmingly conservative set of ‘standards’ for student teachers (Hill, 2002a). Under both Conservative and New Labour Governments, this has entailed the virtual removal of issues of equity and social justice, let alone economic justice, from the ITE curriculum. Study of the social, political and economic contexts of schooling and education has similarly been decimated, hidden, expunged, as has special needs education, child development, and the international, comparative and development aspects of education.

In England and Wales, and elsewhere, teacher education is now rigorously regulated, inspected and policed. ‘Non-compliant’ teacher education courses can be closed or ‘lose permitted numbers’ of students from the next intake which, in turn, can mean ‘teacher training’ redundancies. This has, of course, had a major impact on the current teaching force, and thereby on schooling. Teachers in England and Wales are now, by and large, trained in skills rather than educated to examine the ‘whys and the why nots’ and the social and political contexts of the curriculum, of pedagogy, of educational purposes, of the structures of schooling and education, and the effects these have on reproducing and widening racialised, gendered social class based inequalities in a capitalist national economy and globally. In effect, both Conservative and new Labour governments have overseen the compression and suppression of oppositional, critical and autonomous space and thought – visions and utopias of better futures (and, in some cases globally, better pasts).

Radical Left principles for education

The following four principles for education as a whole are widely accepted by the Radical Left (Hill, 2001, 2002a, b; Hillcole Group, 1997).

1. vastly increased equality (of outcome) both within and between nations/ states
2. comprehensive provision (i.e. schools and post-16 education to be socially and academically mixed – with no private or selective provision of schooling and post-16 education)
3. democratic community control over education (rather than business or religious control, for example)
4. use of the local and national state to achieve a socially just (egalitarian), anti-discriminatory society, rather than the current neo-liberal focus on developing a meritocratic education system/society to end up with very unequal (educational/income/wealth/status) outcomes.

Radical Left principles for teacher education for economic and social justice

I now want to detail principles for economic and social justice within teacher education. I stress the economic, since there’s not too much social justice in a society characterized by a growing mega-rich capitalist class, side-by-side with an industrial and service working class whose pay and conditions are under ‘free-market’ attack, and a growing underclass. The privatised worker who has just had a pay cut, the homeless and jobless street or trailer dweller, would as much benefit from egalitarian economic redistribution as from being treated politely. Economic justice, of course, is scarcely referred to within capitalist systems. Economic injustice/ economic inequality is one of the desiderata and a sine qua non of capitalism.

The Radical Left principles below should form the basis of the review and development of current policy and practice in teacher education and training in states such as the UK and USA, and globally. They pursue the four overarching principles for education above. Thus, a core curriculum for teacher education should:

1. include macro- and micro-theory regarding teaching and learning, in which the socio-political and economic contexts of schooling and education are made explicit. This refers not only to classroom skills and competencies, but also theoretical understanding of children, schooling and society, their inter-relationships, and alternative views and methods of, for example, classroom organization, schooling, and the economic and political relationship of education to society
2. embrace and develop both equal opportunities and egalitarianism (economic and social justice) – so that children and students do not suffer from labelling, under-expectation, stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination from their teachers or from their peers. This egalitarianism should extend from the local to the national to the global communities
3. enable student teachers to develop as critical, reflective teachers, able, for example, to decode media, ministerial (and indeed, political – including Radical Left) distortion, bias, and propaganda. This would encourage the development of effective and critically reflective teachers, able to interrelate and critique theory and practice (their own and that of others).
4. include not only technical and situational reflection, but also critical reflection, so as to question a particular policy, a particular theory, or a particular level of reflection, or such critical questions as ‘whose interests are served’; ‘who wins?’; ‘who loses?’; ‘who is likely to have to continue accepting a subordinate and exploited position in society?’.

Clearly, the above aims for education/ teacher education are not enough. Teacher education curricula should also include the development of:

1. classroom skills and competencies;
2. subject knowledge;
3. higher education level analytical and intellectual skills;
4. a major role for higher education institutions in teacher education and opposition to primarily school-based routes;
5. different routes into teaching concordant with graduate teacher status and the above principles.

Teachers as transformative intellectuals and the politics of educational transformation

Such a curriculum should enable teachers to develop knowledge and skills to critically examine the ideological nature of teaching and the nature of teachers’ work. Teachers, teacher educators and student teachers should develop an understanding of the potential role of teachers in transforming society. It remains possible for teachers to adopt the function of intellectuals and to resist becoming mere managers of day-to-day activities imposed from beyond the school, and to redefine their role within counter hegemonic practice. (Harris, 1994: 115).

The role of teacher educators and teachers as critical intellectuals, instead of as mechanics or technicians, is necessary for the development of a critical, active, interrogating, citizenry – thoughtful, questioning, perceptive as well as skilled – pursuing a democratic, anti-authoritarian, socially responsible and economically and socially just local, national and global economy and society.

References


Dave Hill is Professor of Education Policy at University College Northampton, UK Email: dave.hill@northampton.ac.uk He is Chief Editor of The Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies, www.jceps.com and the Director of the Institute for Education Policy Studies, www.ieps.org.uk