

# Towards a Theoretical Framework for Understanding Social Justice in Educational Practice

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## Introduction

It is the argument of this paper<sup>1</sup> that a new kind of theoretical framework for social justice in education<sup>2</sup> is needed, and the suggestion is made that it will be one which is rooted in radically revisable theory developed in collaboration with practitioners. First, the discourses of equality in schools are becoming unhelpful, and are usefully becoming superseded by discourses of social justice. Second, theories of social justice rooted in liberalism have been based on considerations of housing, health and welfare, and their categories do not readily or usefully apply to education. Third, liberal frameworks, themselves, have been brought seriously into doubt by theories such as those found in postmodernism, and this has implications for ways of theorising social justice. Finally, a suggestion is made for a way forward, building on the critiques of liberalism to develop a continuously revisable framework in place of the timeless universalism of current ones.

The shortcomings of old theories need to be shown before better ones can be developed: the construct will arise from the critique. In this paper there is space only to sketch the broad outlines of a new framework which would avoid some of the problems of the old ones. The argument is rooted in philosophy, but I also argue that philosophy as traditionally understood will not provide all the answers by itself. On the contrary: recent, convincing criticisms of traditional philosophy point to the need for a radically revisable theory, sensitive to difference and to historical specificities.<sup>3</sup> Thus in the particular case of philosophy in relation to education, theory will need to be a co-construction, made with the co-operation of, and in collaboration with, practitioners (Griffiths, 1997). Calling this process 'philosophy' constitutes a challenge to current, mainstream, English language philosophies, including philosophy of education.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, before beginning the main argument of the paper, I turn first, very briefly and schematically, to issues of epistemology and methodology.

## Epistemological and Methodological Issues

This paper reports part of a larger educational research project, which I will refer to by the name, 'Fairer Schools'. In this project, philosophical research has formed part

of a series of conversations with professionals who have a variety of institutional roles in education, with the aim of improving both the philosophy and the practice of social justice in education.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is a philosophical project located on the borderlands between established institutions of knowledge; or to use a different terminology—a different discourse—it is discursively positioned between mainstream discourses of academic and other educational knowledge. It is a philosophical/practical project which is too 'philosophical' to be standard 'educational research', but which is too 'empirical' to be standard 'philosophy of education'.

My methodological framework is rooted in the multi-disciplinary and plural approaches to be found in new developments in feminist epistemology and cultural studies which take account of epistemological standpoints, and dynamic models of identity underpinning them. Among the many examples of this approach, the papers in Lennon and Whitford's collection (1995) provide a recent and varied overview of feminist standpoint theory together with some discussions of the place of identity in epistemology. Other examples, focused on educational knowledge, are provided by Walkerdine (1990), Rattansi (1992), Weiner (1994), MacLure (1996), and Haywood & Mac an Ghaill (1997), all of whom explore the possibilities of developing knowledge based on dynamic models of the construction of identity.

Further, my framework is action-oriented, collective, and collaborative, depending on the difficult business of discovering the perspectives of others rather than assuming any universal subject or object of knowledge. In this it draws on recent philosophical discussions of the possibilities of open, focused interactions with concrete others in relation to their 'situated knowledges' (Spivak, 1990, 1992; Haraway, 1991; Benhabib, 1992; Dhanda, 1994). It also draws on the traditions of action-research and qualitative research, especially those versions of them which are collaborative, politically aware and reflective about ends, rather than those which are individual or technicist in motivation (Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Zeichner, 1993; Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995).<sup>6</sup>

This methodological approach frames the 'Fairer Schools' project. Thus, first, the research is both philosophically and practically oriented. Second, it takes account of the situated perspectives of concrete others, without being relativist, but equally without aspiring to certainty. Third, it is collaborative, but does not depend on the collaborating group reaching a consensus. Fourth, it is iterative in that it depends on a cyclical process of explicit theorising and practical engagement. So this paper reports one stage in an iterative process. It presents a draft—but, necessarily in such a methodology of consultation and revision, so will all future reports.

The Fairer Schools project has been developed in collaboration with other professionals. Collaborative intentions are easy to state, but harder to carry out. The collaboration in this case is with deputy heads, with advisors from educational support services, and with representatives of groups set up by/for educationally disadvantaged groups in terms of race, special needs and sexuality (as well as in the more usual public forums of educational, philosophical and feminist research, such as academic conferences and journals). I regard these people as co-researchers; I do not regard myself as doing research on subjects of investigation. Conversations,

interviews and conferences have been used as a means of testing and generating ideas; they were not intended as an information gathering exercise—as ‘data’ to be analysed. However, my place in the group is one which gives me peculiar powers and responsibilities for the particular bent of the project. Since I was given public resources for carrying out the research, I have a particular responsibility for delivering some useful results. It also means that I am the one who has decided parameters, with all the implications that has for ‘stacking the deck’ in relation to what can be known or done (Lather, 1991, p. xviii). There is another important difference: I have relatively easy access to educational theory and philosophy while most of the other participants have relatively easy access to current practical dilemmas in schools. The project is influenced (though not determined) by the way that I stacked the deck: in the choice of the focus on ‘social justice’ and in the uses of philosophical, social and political theory. Later developments of the project, some of which may have philosophical implications, were shaped by the work of everyone in the team. Collaboration requires that we each work from our strengths and acknowledge our powers and responsibilities in relation to them.

I began the research program with a critical investigation of a number of philosophical, educational and sociological theories of social justice as a basis for a draft theory of improving social justice in education. To do a critical investigation of theory in the field of philosophy is not to clear the ground for later investigation, as it is for other fields. Rather, it is to do a piece of philosophical investigation.

### **Talking of ‘Social Justice’ (rather than of Equal Opportunities)**

The decks were stacked right at the start of the project by my describing it in terms of ‘social justice’, rather than talking of, say, ‘equal opportunities’, or ‘equity’; or of some combination of ‘anti-racism’, ‘feminism’, ‘inclusive education’ and the like. I begin the argument of the paper by explaining the choice of the term. In this section I start by discussing its current usage in education and then go on to look at it from a broader perspective in social and political philosophy.

#### *‘Equality’ Talk*

History shows a long tradition of movements towards social justice, equality and ‘equal opportunities’ in education, occurring in England as in the rest of the world, over the last half century and more.<sup>7</sup> This movement started with a focus on social class, and was expressed in pushes towards meritocracy (for instance, in England, in the adoption of the supposedly neutral 11+ examinations) and towards egalitarian conceptions of education which would benefit children of all social classes (for instance in the establishment of community schools). It expanded in the 1970s and 1980s into a movement for race and sex equality in education—‘equal opportunities’ as it was usually known. This part of the expansion was so successful that race and gender issues have nearly eclipsed social class as a focus for attention. Meanwhile sexuality and disability are emerging as issues in equal opportunities alongside race and gender.

Some problems have been generated by the use of the term 'equal opportunities' itself, as was pointed out by E.P. Thompson as long ago as 1961. He argued that the rhetoric of 'equal opportunities' was used ambiguously, by both right and left wing political parties, such as the Conservative and Labour Parties in England. Moreover, he argued, using it had the effect of increasing the difficulty of articulating a broader vision of equality:

'Get on, get ahead, get up!' say the advertisers. 'The Opportunity State', says the Conservative Party. 'Equality of Opportunity', says the official Labour Party echo. In this orchestration of competitive values, how is incipient heresy to be heard at all? To say that our aim should be, not equality of opportunity within an acquisitive society, but a society of equals; that we need, not more ladders, but, more generous patterns of community life; to say these things is simply to proclaim one's political irrelevance. (Thompson, 1980, p. 2)

Thompson's misgivings were well founded. The history of the rhetoric of 'equal opportunities' in the intervening decades since he wrote this passage shows the way the term has been used by both right and left to argue for different versions of competitive values.

Other difficulties are with the term 'equality' itself. Philosophical difficulties with the idea of equality are well known. Bernard Williams expressed them elegantly in an article which is still a standard:

It has only too often been pointed out that to say that all men are equal in all those characteristics in respect of which it makes sense to say that men are equal or unequal, is a patent falsehood. ... Faced with this obvious objection the defender of the claim is likely to offer a weaker interpretation ... it is their common humanity which constitutes their equality. ... If all the statement does is to remind us that men are men it does not do very much. ... A similar discomfiture tends to overcome the practical maxim of equality. It cannot be the aim of this maxim that all men should be treated alike in all circumstances or even that they should be treated alike as much as possible. (Williams, 1973, pp. 230-231)

As Thompson and Williams point out between them, there are two discourses of equality which co-exist. There is, in the first place, a discourse of competition (as evidenced by Margaret Thatcher 'a soundbite: 'Equality to be unequal'); and, in the second place, a discourse of sameness (with the implication that equality is evidently wrong or evidently dreary). Thus there has been a move to *deride* aspirations for equality, for instance as the politics of envy,<sup>8</sup> while simultaneously *containing* such aspirations by identifying equality with equal competition in a market place governed by economic liberalism. Faced with this pincer movement, disadvantaged groups were able, as Cynthia Cockburn (1991) points out, to play on ambiguities in the meanings attached to 'equality' or 'equal opportunities', to generate coalitions between radicals, liberals and conservatives. But such coalitions are, necessarily, fragile.<sup>9</sup>

### 'Social Justice' Talk

Recently, a way forward has been found: using the term 'social justice' in preference to 'equality' or 'equal opportunities'. 'Social justice' is, itself, a term with a long history in philosophy and politics. It does not, of course, mean quite the same thing as 'equal opportunities'. The question of social justice was raised most influentially by Plato. In *The Republic*, Socrates posed the question of the possibility of there being a social system which would ensure 'the good', both for the city-state and also for the citizens in it. The arguments of *The Republic* focus on—and bring together—questions of individual morality and public justice: the question of why individuals should be just, with the question of what a just city-state would be like. In Part VI a reminder of the starting point is given (p. 192):

We were concerned ... to ensure the highest degree of happiness for the community as a whole without concentrating attention on the happiness of any particular section of it.

This is still a useful starting point.

Further progress was made by Aristotle, building on Plato's foundation. In his analysis, social justice is the justice that includes the law but which goes beyond it. The distinction between justice as following legal rules, and the wider sense of justice as the right distribution of benefits in a society ('distributive justice'), was first stated by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*. He also discussed the tensions between justice for the individual and justice for the community in the *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's continuing influence can be seen in current formulations. Rawls, in his influential treatise on social justice, says that the principles of social justice provide a way of assigning rights and duties, and distributing the benefits and burdens of social co-operation (Rawls, 1972, p. 4).

This tradition of Western philosophy from Plato to Rawls has influenced what is now meant by the term 'social justice'. At its broadest, it still follows the conception of Plato as refined by Aristotle: the good of the community which respects the good of the individuals within it. It further follows a more implicit principle to be found in both Plato and Aristotle that the conception needs to be argued for and rationally accepted, rather than imposed, at least with respect to those members of society who are competent to make the laws. So it is one which must apply equally to all in the sense often described as 'the golden rule': treat others as you would like them to treat you under similar circumstances. Within this broad definition is a recognition that social justice concerns the distribution of resources (or of other desirable elements like status or power) and that this distribution is a principled one. This explains the close connection between issues of social justice and issues of equality, as evidenced, for instance, in the quotations from Thompson and Rawls.

The broad formulation leaves room for profound disagreements in different societies. David Miller usefully points this up in his historical analysis of different concepts of justice held by different societies. Using examples from feudal societies and market economies, he argues that (1976, p. 255):

a man's idea of justice is strongly affected by the nature of the relationships which he enjoys with other men. The social structure of a particular society

generates a certain type of interpersonal relationship, which in turn gives rise to a particular way of assessing and evaluating other men.

He talks of the 'evaluative overtones' of any concept of justice, stating: 'To describe a state of affairs as just or democratic is to pass a favourable judgement on it' (1976, p. 7). Even more profound a difficulty is posed by those who for one reason or another do not recognise the claims of society. Nietzsche gives some reasons for such a position. From another perspective, libertarians like Hayek say that there is no such thing as social justice, only individuals following their own fortunes. It has been pointed out, however, that such a position has its own contradictions since concepts like 'level playing field', are used by libertarians like Hayek, as defining criteria of a just society (Commission for Social Justice, 1993a, p. 4). For all these reasons, as Alasdair MacIntyre has persuasively argued, at our own period of history there is as little agreement on what justice consists in, as there is on moral judgements, or on judgements of rationality (MacIntyre, 1981, 1988). Nevertheless we still need to make judgements about justice in the same way that we need to make them about morality or rationality.<sup>10</sup>

I have been outlining a broad conception of social justice. It can be seen to apply to that particular bit of society represented by education. Education—a particular kind of teaching and learning—is only undertaken and given because of a widespread belief that it is good both for individuals and for communities. This good is precisely the kind of good aimed at in social justice, even though there are different ideas about what constitutes that 'good'. Therefore, social justice issues are recognised as important in education right across the political spectrum. Recent, widely publicised social justice concerns in education include: high levels of exclusion from school; under-achievement of boys; access to higher education and vocational training; parental choice; standards of literacy. They stem from a long history of concerns about the relationship of education to the good of society; about the use of education for the well being of the individual; and about equality. All of these are issues of social justice, because they all require judgements about how best to achieve both the good of individuals in the community and the good of the community itself. Many of them also concern the distribution of resources, status and power.

Social justice is never merely an optional concern either for teachers or for senior managers in education—whether or not they describe what they do in terms of social justice. Educational managers, in common with managers from other areas, sometimes deny that they are involved in anything evaluative: they claim that they are simply applying rational or scientific principles. This claim is false, as was persuasively argued by MacIntyre (1981), and by many others since. An example from the world of education is provided by Padraig Hogan. In his analysis of Murgatroyd and Morgan's recent book on Total Quality Management, he focuses on their claim to be untainted by ideology. He shows up the fallacy in this assumption, by demonstrating how they promote a particular ideological conception of education as 'a customer-supplier relationship, governed primarily by the competitive practices of a market economy' (Hogan, 1995, p. 227).

Social justice issues continue to be vexed by the broad range of interpretations of goodness and justice which marks our fast-changing and increasingly plural and fragmented society—including the interpretation which refuses terms such as ‘goodness’ or ‘justice’ as relevant. They are further vexed because the questions are urgent: resources are limited, and many goods obtainable through education, such as status and power, are necessarily limited to a minority of individuals.

What if managers or teachers in the midst of all this change, plurality and fragmentation, faced as they are with competing demands, try to deal with the situation by turning to theory in the hope it will help them find some guiding principles? They will get little help. The theoretical underpinnings to which they could have turned are collapsing.

### **The Adequacy of Social and Political Theory, Especially these Days, in Education**

Standard modern theories of social justice in education follow standard, orthodox political philosophy which is liberal in outlook and which is largely concerned with distribution of resources within a framework of individualism. Here I refer to liberalism in the context of political philosophy. Earlier I mentioned economic liberalism and referred to equality in the context of politics. These are conceptually separable meanings of ‘liberalism’, but they are, none the less, conceptually connected by a number of strands. The most significant of the strands which connect all the meanings of liberalism is the overriding importance given to individual liberty, understood as the preferences expressed by an individual, rational chooser. In this argument I continue to refer to political philosophy, but it is important to remember that the economic and purely political meanings also resonate within educational contexts—even though in their theoretically developed forms they may be incoherent with each other (Jonathan, 1997).

Individual liberty depends on a number of assumptions and has been used in the development of particular political theories used in discussions of social justice. The idea of an individual, rational chooser depends on the assumption of the ‘unencumbered self’<sup>11</sup> (Griffiths, 1993). It also depends on the assumption that universal principles can be discovered which enable us to determine the right and the good. Utilitarian and Kantian rights-based liberalism remain the two most influential developments of these ideas in political philosophy. Kantian liberalism with its vocabulary of rights and entitlements is particularly firmly embedded in political discourse of justice. Miller provides a useful and succinct summary of the status of social justice from the perspective of rights-based liberalism (1995, pp. 1–2):

Usually the theorist [of justice] will search for some fundamental principle or axiom which he or she believes lies behind all the more concrete beliefs and judgements that we express when we say that this or that action is a fair or just one. ... We might suggest for instance that the fundamental principle of justice is that of *equal treatment ... desert ...* [or] respect of each person’s inalienable *rights*. ... We ask whether equal treatment requires that

jobs be awarded strictly on the basis of personal merit, or whether belonging to a disadvantaged group gives you a fair claim to preferential consideration; and so on. [*Italics in the original*]

Miller is pointing out that rights-based liberal theory depends on making judgements based on merit (or desert), rights and/or needs. Rawls (1972), who was mentioned earlier as using the discourse of rights, is probably the most influential example of such a liberal political philosopher in the English speaking world.

In their current form these theories are largely inappropriate to educational decision making. Problems arise with the categories of 'merit', 'rights' and 'need' in the following ways: in assigning scarce educational resources; with the implicit idea of a person; and with the narrowness of the idea that meeting minimum standards is a central criterion for social justice. Firstly, the categories of merit, rights and needs are central to a liberal theory of social justice, but all of them are difficult to apply in educational contexts. This difficulty is related to a second problem in these theories: their implicit idea of an individual is a grown-up person who can argue rationally in the public forum and make contracts.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, since the categories were worked out in the first place for housing, health and welfare rather than for education, minimum standards, but not competition for positional goods, are taken as central.

The central categories of the standard theories, 'merit', 'rights' and 'need', are very difficult to use when making decisions about assigning resources in education. First, individual 'merit' has little application as a basis for allocating educational resources to young children. It is hard even to agree on what counts as 'merit' in these circumstances: aptitude, effort or results. Second, using the category of 'rights' is not straightforward. Beyond a very few minimum rights, they are hard to rank (Jonathan, 1997). Therefore, they provide little help in deciding between competing rights in conditions of limited resources. Special educational needs is one good example; private schools are another. Moreover, invoking 'rights' tends to level outcomes. A rights perspective is of little help in solving questions related to competition between individual students, once minimum standards have been met. (Minimum standards are discussed further, below.) Finally, the category of 'need' has proved difficult to apply even in the area of Special Educational Needs (Roaf & Bines, 1989). Like 'merit' it is difficult to agree on what counts as a 'need': in some formulations it is anything out of the ordinary—be that special talents or learning difficulties—while in others it is any obstacle to learning. Implicit definitions of 'need' can vary from 'anyone who is insufficiently supported and challenged' to 'those we feel sorry for'.

The second problem arises with the underlying conception of the person in liberal theory. Education is not confined to interactions or contracts between grown-up people. One aspect of this problem arises in relation to determining exactly which person (or group of persons) has the merits, rights and needs. Many of the interactions are between adults and very young children. Many others are between adults and young adults. Moreover, parents, the state and industry all claim to be stakeholders in the nature and outcome of these interactions. In these circumstances

it is not a straightforward matter to determine whose merits are properly rewarded in a state system: those of an individual student or those of her parents, who can use their own talents and industry to help her 'get the edge' (Roker, 1993). Or the merits could be those of the school, whose staff can win a larger slice of available educational resources through their astuteness and hard work. Rights and needs are as difficult to work with. It is not clear whose rights and needs are being met: the student's or her parents'. Or it can be argued they are those of the state or industry, as the debates on Lifelong Learning show so clearly (Burgess, 1997).

Another aspect of the problem arises in relation to the assumptions about the capabilities of the person in liberal theory. In standard theory, this person is an individual rational chooser, and is assumed to be capable of making choices based on rational argument. Serious differences of viewpoint can be ironed out or agreed on through the process of such argument. However, any system which depends on its subjects engaging in public, rational debate must be a problem where small children are concerned. Within liberal philosophy of education the problem is often approached through questions of approaches to multicultural or multifaith communities. Feinberg (1995) uses the example of minority Japanese children in an American school to show how none of the children, Japanese or American, are able to debate their cultural differences or to make rational choices between them. There is only a possibility that cultural understanding may develop as a basis for further discussion. There is no possibility of this without the Americans demonstrating a prior acceptance of the Japanese children 'with their cultural identity reasonably intact' (1995, p. 210). To say this is to undermine liberal assumptions about the kinds of person subject to schooling. Macedo (1995) takes a different approach in discussing how the American school system should accommodate fundamentalist and evangelical religious families who took issue with the reading books used in their Tennessee school district. He appears to assume that the rational discussion is conducted by the adults, 'parents and the local school district' for the sake of the children who must be educated into 'good liberal citizens' (1995, p. 227). However, as Feinberg's argument shows, even if Macedo is right, this approach is of little help in working out what kind of education would be able to produce such good, liberal citizens through liberal means.

The third problem is related to minimum standards, useful for assigning housing, health and welfare but less useful in education. Education is indeed partly about bringing all learners to a particular minimum standard, but a particular difficulty arises because of the inescapability of competition in education, given that educational achievement is used to obtain other, non-educational, goods: for example, jobs, power, status, spouses. Moreover, education is also partly about each individual achieving their potential, even if that does *not* conform to external notions of standards, as is often the case with learners with Special Needs. Furthermore, it is about producing, grading and ranking the future labour force. Finally, and most importantly, education is not just about teaching and learning. It always draws on and affects the personal identities of all concerned. School is a place where pupils—and teachers—form their individual identities and also their identities

as members of communities. This is why self-esteem remains a central concern of educators (Griffiths, 1993).

In its published reports, the Commission on Social Justice (1994) (set up by the British Labour Party when it was in opposition) provided an example of ideas drawn from a consultative committee made up of philosophers, social theorists and political policy makers (though, oddly, not educationists). Using ideas of social justice and minimum standards taken from the relatively simpler cases of shelter, nutrition and healthcare, the Commission argues as if minimum standards were of primary interest in education, since the economy would benefit from a skilled labour force. It does not take into account the possibility that students might actively reject technological education and training which would benefit the current national economic strategy, in favour of the humanities and expressive arts, which might not. Finally, and in my view, perniciously, it takes no note of education as a highly personal and creative activity of teaching and learning.

These are arguments about the deficiency of liberal theories from the point of view of educational practice. More generally, liberal theories have been brought into doubt by arguments coming from a number of directions. Peculiarly persuasive, at the moment, are arguments stemming from postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives, which challenge what they tend to call 'humanism': universal theories based on individual, rational choosers. Other influential arguments stem from the perspective of communitarianism, which challenges basic tenets of liberalism in its relativistic arguments that individuals are not unencumbered selves because each individual is indissolubly part of the community in which she belongs. Thus, for communitarians, all human beings derive their rationality, morality and sense of justice in their particular communities and these concepts are incommensurable between communities. The politics of identity has also been influential. These politics are underpinned by theories that identities are both formed and authenticated by race, class or gender; and thus, so are rationality, morality and a sense of justice. Such theories are critical not only of the liberal or humanist self but also of the unified communities of communitarianism. For the purposes of this paper I will focus only on arguments that come from postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives.

There is, of course, no unified theory that can be labelled 'postmodern' or 'poststructuralist' although there are threads linking different theorists (Griffiths, 1995b). In this article, I shall refer to the whole range of them as 'postmodern'. Featuring strongly in many of them is the proclamation of the 'death of the subject'. This proclamation is based on an argument that there is no possibility of the existence of a central theoretical construct of the Enlightenment, the humanist subject: the bearer of the Rights of Man; the universal citizen with his equality of access to the public sphere, to rational discourse and to the fruits of education; and the holder of privileged knowledge of his own wants and beliefs. The death of the subject is a precursor to the introduction of a fragmented subjectivity constructed and re-constructed in a plurality of discourses.

The success of these arguments in academic circles has meant that old universal, humanist, liberal certainties of modernity have given way to analyses which are

grounded in the plurality and fragmentation which characterise social groups. Within theories focusing on social justice, such as those found in feminist, anti-racist or queer theory, this emphasis on plurality and fragmentation has resulted in it becoming increasingly obvious that social inclusions or exclusions cannot be simply described in terms of gender, *or* race, *or* class *or* sexuality: all inclusions and exclusions are non-additive combinations of all of these. Moreover, such inclusions and exclusions are themselves liable to change as they become the subject of reflexive discourse. Therefore, neither the exclusions nor the associated politics fit current theoretical categories. On the one hand, they are not constructed purely on the basis of individual political interests, as mainstream liberal modernity would have it. On the other, they do not arise solely on the basis of the simplicities of a political identity defined in terms of gender, race, class or sexuality.

Postmodern critique is increasingly found in educational theorising, and there are also signs of postmodern influences on the construction of theory and the development of practice, including practice related to the improvement of social justice. There are those who argue that postmodernism is inimical to any project of emancipation, while others try to incorporate aspects of it into their work while remaining critical. Burbules & Rice (1991) is one such example; Hargreaves (1994) is another. Certainly there is no shortage of suspicion expressed, especially by those coming from feminist or anti-racist perspectives, about the politics implicit in any kind of postmodernism. Some note how theorists trying to go beyond simple categories of identity are liable to oversimplify concepts such as 'empowerment' (Troyna, 1995); or to lose sight of a practical politics altogether (Phillips, 1993). Others work from a position that emancipatory politics shares concerns and perspectives with postmodernism. This is a continuing argument between different groups committed to emancipatory politics and postmodernists, as I have already detailed elsewhere (Griffiths, 1995b, 1998b).<sup>13</sup> It would be resolved if there were a clear demonstration of emancipatory use. In 1991, Lather was still commenting on the present limitations of postmodernism in answering the question of action (1991, p. 12). However, those influenced by postmodern perspectives, including Lather, continue to seek ways to work out the practical outcomes for education. By the end of the decade, there is clear evidence of possibilities opening up, for instance in the work of Weiner (1994), Sewell (1996), Weiner & Paechter (1996), Gore (1997) and Haw (1998). It is striking how many of these researchers are, in fact, committed to emancipatory politics of feminism and anti-racism. However this work is a long way from adding up to guiding principles for social justice issues, in general. Indeed 'adding up to' is not a postmodern possibility. Given the plural and fragmented nature of the postmodern turn, any principles would have to be sought elsewhere.

In summary: social justice is understood within an essentially liberal framework of universal ideals, individual freedom and rights-based morality. However, liberalism as it is currently developed, is of limited help in educational practice, especially in conditions of increasing plurality and fragmentation. Unfortunately, alternatives to liberalism are in an early stage of development, and none of them, as yet, is in a position to offer much help either (though it is hoped that this Fairer Schools project

is part of the move to change this state of affairs). Meanwhile, social justice issues in schools remain as urgent as ever. Hard-pressed managers and teachers, themselves coping with ever changing conditions and turbulent times, would benefit from theories which addressed their urgent needs. They, like the children and students they teach, cannot wait until the theory is ready. In any case, the methodological framework within which I work indicates that reliable, useful knowledge is found if practitioners help guide the formulations of abstractions even as the abstractions help guide practice.

### A New Framework?

In the last part of the paper I sketch how a new and better framework could be developed. As I said in my description of the methodological approach, this paper represents just one stage in an iterative process. There will be no finished product offered, though I will offer an outline of a provisional one. However, even a provisional framework needs to be of use in the educational search for social justice. I sketch its development in four stages. First, I argue that it is important to delve more deeply into the story of liberalism and its critique than does the story as I have told it. Doing this indicates, second, something of the way issues of justice are understood in practical educational situations. Third, from this position, it is useful to look at issues of justice in education in more detail, in order to measure up the generalities against particular cases. This involves looking both at underlying ethics and also at procedures (i.e. in philosophical terms, at both the good and the right). Finally, a suggested framework emerges. The purpose here is to understand issues of social justice in *education*. The critiques given in this article show that it is important to start with the context of education, rather than trying to develop a theory in isolation from it. I should note that it is possible that such an account could have implications beyond the world of education in political theory, for instance, though that is not the concern here.

The story, as I have told it, is an overly simple one—but it is an over-simplification which is widely believed. One reason that over-simple stories are told is the use of labels, which help to give a grasp on the debate, but which simultaneously obscure some of its interesting and significant complexities. For instance, I have talked about current theories in terms of labels like ‘liberalism’ and ‘postmodernism’. But these are labels, which bring together a number of disparate views under the same name. It is common to put together Lyotard, Derrida, Irigaray, Foucault and Kristeva, for instance, as ‘postmodern’, but these are theorists with profound differences, and, often, with bitter disagreements among themselves. Similarly, I have described what is meant by liberalism for the purposes of this paper, but the lines between liberal and non-liberal are not at all clear, as adjustments are made to the assumptions of liberalism while trying to retain its broad framework. Walzer, for instance, appears as a critic of liberalism in Sandel’s (1984) collection. However, Daniel Bell hails his (1983) book, *Spheres of Justice*, as ‘the foundation of a new, emergent liberalism’.<sup>14</sup> Feinberg, discussed earlier, is committed to what he calls ‘liberalism and democracy’, but within the proviso that this ‘liberalism’ is an ‘expanded liberal philosophy’

(1995, p. 216). Similarly Jonathan remains committed to the 'liberal ideal' in education, in spite of many stringent criticisms of it, because she considers that an 'ethical interpretation adds to liberal theory' and is an improvement on neutralism of traditional liberalism (Jonathan, 1997, p. 185).

It is worth re-examining the simple version of the story. In the simple version, there is a great deal of debate about the contradictions held to exist between different frameworks, especially with respect to justice. Indeed, as I said earlier, in some of the simple versions it is said that postmodern thinking is inimical to any project of emancipation and so also to social justice. However, as I have been arguing, justice and social justice are not ideas which appear only in versions of liberalism. On the contrary, they appeared in the philosophy of (non-liberal) ancient Greeks, and have continued to appear in various systems since, including, in various ways, in the texts of theorists labelled as 'postmodern'. The framework underpinning political philosophy of liberalism gives a way of interpreting them, which has been particularly influential for us in the West, but that does not mean it owns them. An analysis which includes the complexities enables us to see that apparently contradictory systems may be made up with threads which can be re-woven into new cloth.

It is possible to find the strands of different schools of thought in everyday, educational thinking about justice. In the world of education, liberal categories have an abiding influence. In schools and other places of learning, a concern with the merits, rights and needs of individuals remains strong. Similarly, some of the categories of communitarianism appear in both conservative and radical educational thinking. Community politics, meaning either the politics of ethnicity or of neighbourhood, is a powerful discourse in the everyday world of educational policy making. Less happily, in my view, community is invoked in the move back to the nostalgic ideas of 'nation' or 'Englishness' to be found in more conservative educational thinking. Meanwhile, most equal opportunity policies tend to assume that identity in the form of race and gender is the basis for intervention. These are assumptions taken from the politics of identity. Lastly, I would argue that post-modern ideas gain a purchase in everyday educational thinking, even though they are rarely labelled with such a term (Griffiths, 1995b).

All of these views can be subsumed under the broad understanding of social justice coherent with the views of Plato and Aristotle, but this is only a beginning. The broad understanding, as I stated it before, is that social justice is to be found in the good of the community which respects the good of the individuals within it. Within this broad definition is a recognition that social justice concerns the distribution of resources. This is only a beginning because serious differences emerge as the driving concepts are understood. Not only are our ideas in this regard very different from those of the Greeks, but they are also much more complex, influenced as we are by the range of understandings listed above, in conditions where that 'we' is much more diverse and fragmented than it was in the Greek city-states.

In the Fairer Schools project we found that a useful way of proceeding was to discuss particular cases of injustice or of working for social justice. These were then used as a basis for reflection on how a coherent set of principles might be drawn up,

which accommodated these intuitions. The examples were drawn from a number of threads. For instance, some of them related to equal treatment (Nobody should run up the stairs or jump the dinner queue, not even teachers). Others related to the special concerns of gender, race or sexuality as they appear in school situations (giving children strategies for dealing with racism in school). Others again related to processes of resolving disagreements (who should be consulted and how the necessary trust could be built up). The resulting principles were not the result of the application of any kind of prior theory, liberal or other. On the contrary, threads of various theories might be discerned: in particular, an apparently liberal commitment to the individual and to discussion was obvious. However, the appearance of a commitment which would be acceptable to any one system was not taken as a signal to apply the rest of that system. Rather, the internal coherence of the set of principles itself was taken as success. This then opened the way to examine the set of principles for its epistemological and ethical commitments.

The final framework as we left it at the end of the project was a practical one. It was expressed as a series of guidelines for procedure. For instance, it starts:

*A fair school is always a learning community of pupils, teachers, support staff, parents and neighbourhood. 'Equality is not the end but the way.' The same is true for fairness.'*

It expresses an ethical position but not a fixed one. Principles 5 and 6 are:

*There is an in-built chance of learning leading to a complete change of direction (including of dearly held values and traditions). A change of direction means wholeheartedly holding the new values. This cannot be undertaken lightly. The point is to acknowledge that people can change their minds when they learn.*

*Meanwhile it is important that both the leadership and also the rest of the school has a clear ethos and tries to act on it. The core values must be the ones that create conditions for learning. The ethos must support this.*

Each of these principles was worked out in response to sets of examples, which could be cited in explanation. The set as a whole can be described in abstract theoretical terms: a theoretical framework which underpins a movement for social justice in education. This framework includes: (1) both the good and the right; (2) a belief in and commitment to the good and the right; (3) an understanding that (1) and (2) are revisable. Further, in every case, attention is paid to particular cases of justice or injustice, which are measured up against abstract categories in an iterative process. Implicit in this process are attitudes (themselves revisable) which constitute the good and provide principled grounding for the procedures. They include, crucially: learning, consultation, commitment, humility, perseverance, love, respect and a desire for learning. This is a framework which allows progress to be made with improving itself, at the same time as giving guidance on how progress is to be made in improving social justice in educational practice.

This process has to be carried out, patiently, educational arena by educational arena. People working in each arena are likely to create their own versions, in formats useful to them. In the course of the Fairer Schools project this was done by people whose professional pre-occupations were at school rather than at classroom or policy levels, so we formulated a set of principles for use by any school manager (head or deputy) who wanted to work for a fairer school (see Griffiths, 1998a). Elsewhere I have used this framework to formulate a set of principles for educational research (Griffiths 1998b). This is work in progress, drawing on critiques and constructs drawn from liberalism and its critics, and which points to the possibility of finding ways of working for social justice in education, whichever part of our fast-changing, plural, and fragmented world we inhabit.

## Notes

1. The research on which this paper is based was funded by the ESRC senior research fellowship scheme, 1995–1996.
2. In ‘education’ I include tertiary and preschool education, non-school institutions like youth centres and careers guidance, and the institutional arrangements of ‘lifelong learning’. However, I am mainly thinking of primary and secondary schools, since this is where my collaborating research partners work.
3. There is further discussion of the limitations of traditional philosophy in Griffiths (1995a).
4. There are exceptions. There are a few mainstream philosophers who consult with others and who consider the specificity of their own position. Walzer is one, and Foucault is another—in so far as either of them can now be called ‘mainstream’ in Britain.
5. The project is further described in Griffiths (1998b).
6. In my own recent work (e.g. Griffiths 1994, 1995a, b) I drew on these approaches and developed them.
7. This can be seen as the latest episode in what Raymond Williams has influentially described as a ‘long revolution’.
8. For instance, see discussions by Kate Myers (1990) and Stephen Ball (1990).
9. A rhetoric of sameness or of competition continues to be pervasive in discussions of equality. The discussion between White (1994) and Norman (1995) points up the relative power of this discourse in relation to others which are to be preferred. In this, at least, both seem to be in agreement, though they disagree about whether the alternatives can properly be described as discourses of equality. See also the discussion by Leicester (1996) which draws attention to this peculiarity of the discourse.
10. In his 1995 inaugural lecture Wilfred Carr (Carr, 1997) points out that there seems to be decreasing agreement about what education is for or how it should be studied—but that we cannot do without it. Indeed it is more urgent than ever to speak ‘for’ education.
11. I say more about this in my article on the philosophical underpinnings of theories of self-esteem (Griffiths, 1993).
12. As Pateman (1988) has shown, the ‘person’ is in fact, an adult male, who makes a sexual contract with women. Hobbes is the only exception among social contract theorists here, according to Carole Pateman. This argument remains relevant because the legacy of the implicitly male person continues, living on in assumptions about the gendering of parents, work, childcare and the domains labelled private or public.
13. See also Lather (1991); hooks (1991); Flax (1993); Nicholson & Seidman (1995); Stronach & MacClure (1997).
14. In the blurb on the back of the book.

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