

EQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

The main purpose of the article is to highlight the implications of equality and discrimination processes in education and to allow the development of the capacity to analyze social reality by integrating pro-equality and anti-discrimination perspectives in teaching methods.

In this sense, I reviewed some of the sociological perspectives for understanding the mechanisms of equality and discrimination. I focused on the perverse effects to show how equality can lead to inequality, and I addressed the implications of symbolic violence in the process of reproducing social inequalities.

At the end of the article I propose two pro-equality and anti-discrimination solutions: sociological imagination and socio-cognitive conflict.

Keywords: equality; discrimination; perverse effect; symbolic violence; sociological imagination; socio-cognitive conflict.

1. Introduction to conceptual meanings

1.1. Equality. The literary definition of equality is irrelevant that this must be the same with something or someone, but it remains vague in terms of clarifying aspects of how such similarity should be or shouldn't be in this (Bruce & Annual, 90). To clarify these issues, I will further address four types of equality: ontological equality, equal opportunities, equal living conditions, and equal income and outcomes (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 2006).

Ontological equality is associated with religious beliefs. For example, the Christian religion speaks of the fact that all people are equal before God because He is the creator of all mankind. However, such an orientation poses problems in understanding the existence in society of the multiple forms of social inequality that are often considered as a given state.

The idea of equal opportunity originates in claims made during the French Revolution of 1789 and is the subject of the first article in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen “People are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social differences can only be based on public utility”. Critics have pointed out that such equality is difficult to achieve because people belong to different social categories and will therefore put capital into different shapes and amounts. Under these conditions, the advantage will most often appear to individuals from favored social classes, and “meritocratic competition” will always be unequal.

In response to the idea of equal opportunities, those who campaigned for equal living conditions proposed that welfare and education be regulated through legislation that reduces social disadvantages between individuals. However, an equality of living conditions seems unrealistic, because there are those who would assume that the process of socialization of children should be done away from their families to minimize the cultural influences of the class of origin and to nullify the social benefits gained by inheriting property. Similar conditions should lead to a society without competition and based on an altruistic education.

Radical critics have called for equal income through a program of political and economic revolution, designed to remove the social cause of inequality once and for all. However, starting from the finding that the differential of social class, status, power and authority can never be eradicated in its entirety, an equality of income seems unachievable.

In education, even if imperfect, equal opportunities seem to be the most appropriate way to allow the development in society of processes of upward social mobility. In fact, this form of equality is the only one that does not contradict values such as personal freedom and individualism. Abercrombie ET al (2006) pointed out that in the UK, parents consider it their right to choose the best education for their children (state education vs. private education) and that government should not be the ultimate personal freedom of choice to choose, not even in the name of the ideas of equal living conditions or equal income. In this sense, statistics indicate that in the last half of the century there is more school inequality than income inequality (Boudon, Besnard, Cherkaoui, Lécuyer, 1996).

1.2. Discrimination. Etymologically, the term discrimination comes from the Latin “discriminatus” which means to divide, to separate, and to distinguish. In literary language, discrimination refers to the ability to say something about a thing, to note or observe the difference, to make choices or to have certain preferences. In common parlance, however, this term means the arbitrary denial or assertion of the privileges, power, and prestige of members of a group (Schifirneț, 116). Such a distinction is biased and has its origin in the membership of the discriminator in a certain group, class or social category.

In the field of education, ONU has regulated issues related to discrimination since 1960, when the Convention against Discrimination in Education was signed in Paris on 4 December. It provides that the term “discrimination” includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, on the basis of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or

social origin, economic status or place of employment. Birth, has as its purpose or effect the annulment or impairment of equal treatment in education.

In recent decades, debates on equality and discrimination in contemporary education have become a “must be” and this is an important part of critical discourse concerning the European ideology (Suciu, 2014). However, the distance between debate and implementation is quite large because both concepts are generous in establishing human ideals, but complicated in identifying the most effective forms of application. In the following I will review some aspects related to the difficulties encountered by good intentions to equalize the chances of access to education and to reduce situations of school discrimination.

2. Perspectives on understanding the mechanisms of equality and discrimination

Even if it seems utopian, finding a formula for social change is one of the concerns of “gold diggers” in the fields of social sciences in general and sociology in particular. In order to understand the difficulties of changing society from an unequal to an equal one, I selected for analysis two perspectives for understanding the mechanisms of equality and discrimination: perverse effects and symbolic violence.

2.1. The perverse effects. How can equality lead to inequality? Perverse effects, also known as compositional effects or unintended effects, occur when two (or more) individuals, in pursuit of a given goal, create an unattended state of affairs that may be unpleasant for either of them, either from the point of view of each one (Boudon, 1996).

In order to particularize this issue in the field of education, I will start from one of the important ideas that led to mass education. According to it, education is considered to be the privileged instrument for implementing the social equality policy. This political decision was supported both by economists who predicted that the development of education will lead to a reduction in wage inequality, and by sociologists who saw the increase in schooling as a means of increasing social mobility.

Political economist Lester Carl Thurow noted that the development of the education system has allowed a reduction in school inequalities, but has also led to the emergence of perverse effects by increasing economic inequalities. Under these conditions, the long-awaited social mobility was delayed.

Raymond Boudon (1973) explained this situation through the typological model of inequality of opportunity. In his approach, the French sociologist started from 3 fundamental axioms:

“AF1: In a society X there is a strong inequality of opportunity in front of education depending on the social origin.

AF2: The chances of obtaining a high social status are much higher for those who have a higher level of education;

AF3: There is a discrepancy between the two structures put in relation: the educational one and the social one”.

To justify his position, Boudon (1973) analyzes the macro social phenomenon of increasing the demand for education. A summary analysis of statistics from industrialized countries indicates that “individuals enjoy, on average, higher economic and social wages the higher their level of education.” The central element of this empirical conclusion is the “average” formula, a formula that aims to indicate that there may be situations in which the link between pay and school level is negative. In a more concrete approach, Boudon imagines a social system in which there are only two levels of education and, for them, only two levels of pay.

“On average” the remuneration of individuals with a higher level of education is higher than the remuneration of individuals with a lower level of education. Starting from the assumption that individuals expect that in the future the situation will be reproduced, Boudon remarks that in equal social conditions one can reach the situation in which the whole population would be interested only in the higher level of education. However, these individual choices would generate a situation of absolute school inflation, which under the given conditions is a concrete example of a perverse effect. Even if personal choices aim at maximizing the individual's chances of social success, the overlapping of several choices generates an undesirable effect, both for oneself and for others, found in the devaluation of school diplomas.

But in real life, the example considered by Raymond Boudon cannot exist because the possession of resources differs from one social class to another. This makes the school investment to be judged in terms of risks. Specifically, if the schooling of a child would cost 1000 euros, the risk of such an investment would be easier to assume than a family with an income of 100,000 euros and impossible to assume for another who earns only 500 euros.

In the context of equal opportunities that we theoretically have to access education, the analyzed examples indicate a discrepancy between theory and practice, and the conclusion of the French sociologist does not offer many concrete solutions for the society in which we live: “In a situation of inflation of school demand, stratification has the effect of reducing the intensity of inflation. But this result is to the detriment of the lower classes.” (Boudon, 1996, 226).

2.2. *Symbolic violence. Reproduction of social inequalities.* The concept of symbolic violence is linked to the name of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In substantiating his theory, he starts from the fact that the individuals of each society are ranked based on the economic, cultural and social resources (capitals) that each of them possesses. Throughout life, people will struggle to occupy higher social positions, generating tensions in inter individual relationships. In the game of domination of the other, each will use the capitals he possesses and which, depending on the situation, he will convert so as to obtain maximum satisfaction with minimum effort (Bujorean, 2017; Domunco, 2006).

There is in this whole process a resource with the value of “Joker” that offers the most and safest gains, regardless of the social area in which the individual operates. It is called symbolic capital and is associated with prestige, honor, and respect.

The conversion of different forms of capital into symbolic capital is done simultaneously with the transformation of power relations between individuals into relations of significance and produces social illusions in a relationship that ends up being considered correct, both by dominants and dominated (Stănciulescu, 1998). This is also the mechanism that generates symbolic violence, which Bourdieu states is “censored and euphemized, that is, unrecognizable and recognized” (Bourdieu, 1999, 206).

So it is a matter of hidden violence, which does not necessarily have to do with hatred, anger, massacre, cruelty or collective atrocities. This “soft” form of violence can be committed by various types of economic, cultural or social domination that are not visible in everyday violence (Héritier, 1996, 13).

We must specify, however, that we could not speak of symbolic violence if the participants in such an act did not possess common semantic codes. Therefore, the process of symbolic imposition of power is preceded by the creation in the individual of cognitive schemes that determine the light in which he will see things (Stănciulescu, 1997, 171). Throughout this equation, the role of the state and implicitly of politics is essential because, having the capacity to concentrate and exercise symbolic power, it “has the means to impose and inculcate such sustainable principles” (Bourdieu, 1999, 85). Imposition presupposes a language laden with aggression and violence with Manichaean accents: “those who are against symbols are covered by all negative epithets, and those who accept and comply with them receive all the praise” (Mihăilescu, 2000, 185).

In order to understand the implications of symbolic violence in the school phenomena of inequality and discrimination, we will start from the premise that three students from different social classes (lower, middle and upper) are classmates. One day the math teacher teaches the students a lesson that contains five new things. The way the teacher explains and the level of preparation of the three students allows each of them to understand only three of the five aspects newly taught. The next day, to check the degree of fixation of knowledge, the teacher asks five questions (one for each of the subjects taught). The three children answer correctly as follows: the one in the lower class - three correct answers, the one in the middle class four - five correct answers, the one in the upper class - five correct answers and ask another difficult question to the teacher. At the end of the lesson, each of the three students is convinced that they have received the marks on merit and that the best in mathematics is the student in the upper class. Analyzing this situation through the theory of symbolic violence offers us the possibility of a new perspective of understanding school inequality and discrimination.

Even if, in theory, each of the three students have equal chances to achieve school performance, according to Pierre Bourdieu behind these performances are hidden mechanisms that produce only the illusion of meritocratic school rankings. The theory of the French sociologist speaks about the existence in the social space of relatively autonomous fields in which different species of capital are “traded”. Thus, in the educational field will be traded cultural capitals (academic knowledge, skills, etc.), in the financial field economic capitals (money, property, etc.), and in the political field social capital (social relations, “knowledge”, etc.). Because each

individual possesses in different proportions the three types of capital, there will be a natural tendency to convert surplus capital species into capital species necessary for successful activation in a given field. However, in order to avoid a physical domination, through a visible violence, the social actors will be interested in investing in forms of symbolic capital. Specifically, if money (economic capital) is used in the educational field to buy a university diploma (cultural capital), the diploma holder will be seen and labeled as an aggressor. Converting money into knowledge will allow the investor to obtain a university degree based on the accumulated cultural capital. This mode of action allows the social recognition of the investor (symbolic capital), but also the mystification of the social reality both for him and for the other competitors.

In the example with the three children, the one from the lower class has neither social capital nor economic capital to convert them into cultural capital and thus his chances to understand at home the things he did not understand at school are zero. Beyond this shortcoming resulting from the disadvantaged social situation, the experience also has implications on how this child will build his own way of seeing and interpreting things. For him, the one in the upper class will be better because he demonstrated this fact by the correct answers given to the teacher's questions. The perspective that opens up in front of him is to choose professional trajectories in accordance with his social condition, by internalizing reasoning such as: "this job is for me, the other job is not for me." We must mention that such an error of social perception also occurs in the mind of the upper class child. He will consider that the grade obtained is due to his academic performance, but forgetting that behind these performances are the financial and social investments of his family. In Bourdieu's terms, we are talking about a mystification of social reality in which all three children are victims of a social illusionism that paves the way for labeling such as "I am better than you because I am smarter!"

Although the perspective of the French sociologist can be challenged for his critical position on the role of reproducer of social structures that the school plays in the process of socialization, I consider that his theoretical model is a good opportunity to realize that equality and discrimination are ubiquitous in everyone's life of us.

3. Possible pro-equality and anti-discrimination solutions

3.1. Sociological imagination. The elimination of mechanisms of inequality or discrimination in society remains a difficult or even impossible goal to achieve. I believe that, in these circumstances, an important step in reducing these social phenomena could be taken in changing the way we are used to looking at the social reality in which we live. In this sense, I plead for the practice of what the American sociologist Write Mills (1975) called "sociological imagination". This is how you look at the world so that you see the connections between the seemingly independent problems of the individual and the important social problems. In other words, we should understand the way people are shaped by things they do not see. The concrete way to achieve this is empathy. This involves "getting out of your skin, and putting yourself in someone else's shoes" (Richards, 2010).

This exercise of leaving our limited worlds and entering the worlds of others allows us to be aware of the existence of cultural differences, to assess the effects of political actions on society and, perhaps most importantly, to gain self-awareness.

3.2. Socio-cognitive conflict. Socio-cognitive conflict is a teaching method that focuses on changing participants' reaction to a social stimulus. For a socio-cognitive conflict to take place, it is necessary to have groups that are challenged to debate opposing views on a given situation.

The functioning mechanism of socio-cognitive conflict is based on the existence of the P factor. The characteristic of this factor is to inhibit, in a given situation and at least temporarily, an instinctive response that was previously normal, in order to replace it with a new and intelligent response. Therefore, the conflict leads to an adaptive reaction, a coordinated reaction both cognitively and socially.

In teaching, socio-cognitive conflict is used in the exposure with the opponent (concerns an element of contagion and multiplication in the group of the divergence / disturbance proposed not by the reader, but by even one of the group members) and in the focus group (a designated member of the group intervenes with criticism and controversy on the issue under discussion, when the discussion was prematurely exhausted by the group).

In the socio-cognitive conflict, the participants are at the intersection of several incompatible responses caused simultaneously by the situation in question: their own response, the model's response, the responses of other members of the community and even some adaptive responses, which would not cause an authentic answer.

In the present case, the use of socio-cognitive conflict would have beneficial effects in suspending discriminatory reactions. Pedagogical practice offers at least three reasons for the effectiveness of socio-cognitive conflict (Pânișoară, 2003, 66):

The information. The informational support offered by the other is particularly useful in developing one's own model of evolution. Thus, the social side of the conflict has motivational support and a broad field.

Activism. Socio-cognitive conflict establishes a type of active social and cognitive behavior (based on noticing and solving dilemmas).

Creativity. Conflict resolution involves the emergence of a third solution that contains elements from the early stages, but exceeds them in terms of development, as a way of integration and effectiveness.

4. Instead of conclusions: pro-equality and anti-discrimination applications

If we look at education in terms of investment, it should start primarily with human values. "In this context, any activity of training the personality of a social actor can only emphasize a series of internal and external factors, meant to sustain such a course of action." (Eși, 2010). Changing the educational process in order to acquire new skills has become or is necessary in preparing young people for the future needs of society (Jeder, 2020). Among the many possibilities

for implementing such an approach, I present below two applications designed to develop human values such as empathy, equal opportunities and mutual respect:

Application no. 1: Labels - the development of empathic capacity

6 volunteers gather in a circle and propose a topic for discussion. Each of them will have one of the following labels in front of it: The expert: "Ask me for advice!", Difficult man: "Criticize me!", Important man: "Respect me!", The funny one: "Laugh at me!", Helpless: "Help me!", Insignificant man: "Ignore me!"

Participants must suggest the status of the interlocutor through verbal, nonverbal and para-verbal communication. Each player must finally guess who he is, stating whether the way he was treated was similar to the way he is treated every day? Is it better or worse?

Application no. 2: Socio-cognitive conflict (anti-discrimination exercise). The moderator divides the class into two camps. One will play the role of a minority ethnic group in Romania (preferably the Roma ethnic group), and the other will play the role of the majority ethnic group. The topic of the discussion will be: Equal opportunities in education. Each of the two teams will identify in a first phase five causes of the lower chances that the minority ethnic group has in accessing education. In the second stage, the teams will develop five solutions to equalize these chances. At the end, the perspectives of the two teams will be analyzed, and the moderator will present his own version of understanding this situation. To what extent did the conflict manage to be socio-cognitive?

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