

**Institute for Educational Research, Belgrade, Serbia**

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“Educational Research and School Practice”

**TOWARDS A MORE  
EQUITABLE EDUCATION:  
FROM RESEARCH TO CHANGE**

**BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS**

**Editors**

Mladen RADULOVIĆ

Marija TRAJKOVIĆ

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023

Faculty of Philosophy, Belgrade

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# LIMITATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH

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Sociologists generally approach the issues of a just education and education for a just society from two perspectives. The first approach is more empirical and involves documenting data on: 1) the exclusion of certain social groups from the education system; 2) the lower academic achievements of students from lower classes; and 3) various forms of domination (especially gender-based) manifested in textbook content, the curriculum, and the organization of the school as an institution (Ahearn, 2021; Carbonaro et al., 2023; Daniels & Cole, 2010; Gast, 2022; Jackson & Schneider, 2022; Johnson, 2022; Mbekeani, 2023; Passaretta & Skopek, 2021; Sarah et al., 1988; Tarabini et al., 2018). The second approach is more theoretical and aims to explain the collected empirical data through various economic, social, cultural, and political processes and structures (Apple, 1993; 1996; 2012; Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Paseron, 2014; Feinberg & Soltis, 2009; Gevirc & Krib, 2012; McRobbie, 1978; Willis, 1981).

There are three fundamental assumptions underlying sociological research on class-related problems in education, from exclusion to disparity in test achievements. First, it is believed that one of the primary functions of the education system is to select students for specific positions in the social and economic stratification (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy & Levin, 1985; Davis & Moore, 1945; Parsons, 1992; 2017). Second, a just education system guarantees equal opportunities for all students (Kim & Choi, 2017; Parsons, 1992; 2017). Equality of opportunity is here understood in two senses, narrow and broad. In the narrow sense, the principle of equal opportunities implies universal access to education and it is crucial for understanding the issue of exclusion. On the other hand, the broad principle of equal chances implies eliminating the influence of socioeconomic status on academic achievements (Davis & Moore,

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1945; Jary & Jary, 1991; Kim & Choi, 2017; Parsons, 1992; 2017). The third assumption directly derives from the previous two and concerns the justness of society as a whole. A society is considered just if it is meritocratic and meritocracy presupposes that the education system has a selective function, while being based on the principle of equal opportunities in the narrow and broad senses (Janković, 2022). In other words, in a meritocracy, all members of society have the opportunity to reach the most prestigious social and economic positions through their effort and talent.

One serious problem lies at the core of this group of assumptions and the sociological research based on it. The methodology of Amartya Sen can be of assistance in shedding light on this issue. Sen uses the case-implication critique to examine the quality of the principles of justice (Sen, 1979). This methodology entails the application of the principles of justice to specific situations that are seen as intuitively just or unjust, followed by an assessment of the principles themselves. Since the second and third assumptions discussed previously are related to the principles of justice (a just education and a just society), they can be analyzed using Sen's case-implication critique.

To emphasize once again, the third assumption concerns the just distribution of society members into positions within the existing social and economic stratification. The principle of distribution is based on merit, in this case, the academic achievements of society members. In a just education system (the second assumption), academic achievements embody only students' effort and talent. The problem with such a distributive logic lies in its complete disregard for "the structure of the division of labor" (Young, 1990, p. 16). Let us take the example of the structure of labor division in Serbia from the perspective of income inequality. Eurostat data from 2016 showed that the earnings of the highest decile were higher than the combined earnings of the entire lower half of the population. More strikingly, the combined incomes of the wealthiest two percent were higher than the incomes of the lowest thirty percent combined (as cited in Krek, 2018). In a comparative view, data for the same year showed that "Serbia has a higher income inequality than any European Union country" (Arandarenko et al., 2017, p. 1). In the meantime, income inequality in Serbia has decreased and Serbia is comparatively doing better, but the Gini coefficient has remained high.

Aside from these income inequality figures, it is essential to note that "70 percent of the population earns less than the official minimal consumer basket", indicating a high level of poverty (Krek, 2018). This was also demonstrated by a recent CRTA study.

When asked by researchers, “What are the biggest problems you and your family are facing?”, 51 percent of respondents stated living standards (poverty), high prices, and unemployment as their first response (Mihailović et al., 2023).

The state of social and economic structures in Serbia is intuitively unjust. Consequently, any attempt to define a supposedly just principle of selecting people within unjust structures must be unsuccessful, since in the given circumstances (case-implication), it cannot lead to an intuitively just society. Even if the influences of socioeconomic status on academic achievement were eliminated, the education system would have a minuscule effect on social justice in Serbia. High levels of inequality and poverty would remain (almost) untouched, while the change would only be reflected in the class composition of different income percentiles, which would become significantly more diverse. In other words, the issues of educational justice and the impacts of education on social justice cannot be limited to the question of (potential) intergenerational class reproduction. To be just, education must play a significant role in social transformation and the reduction of economic inequalities from a distributive justice perspective.

How schools can contribute to creating a more just society is a central question in critical pedagogy. The basic idea of this theory is to transform schools into agents of social change (Cho, 2012, p. 1). This is achieved through a series of practices that help students develop “habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal circumstances of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media or discourse” (Shor, 1992, p. 129). The dispositions, values, and skills developed by critical pedagogy are not worthy in themselves. They must “serve as a point of departure for a politics of resistance and counterhegemonic struggle” (McLaren, 1998, p. 448). The ultimate goal is the “transformation of structures and conditions” that reproduce social injustice (Darder et al., 2009, p. 2). To reiterate, schools organized according to critical pedagogy models prepare students to engage in the political life of their community and thus influence decisions that shape the structure of labor division and consequently, levels of inequality and poverty.

The analysis of unequal educational opportunities cannot be the final frontier of sociological research on education that rests on the premise that structures and institutions in Serbia are fundamentally unjust and produce unacceptably high levels of inequality and poverty. Critical pedagogy can provide a solid foundation for a range of new research questions that surpass the limitations of existing research.

**Keywords:** sociology of education, critical pedagogy, inequality, social transformation

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