Does the education system in Britain help create a fair society? (1200 words)

Within this essay, aspects of education such as: Special Educational Need schools, gender and racism will all be explored. The aim of this is to highlight how such elements impact on the community and help determine whether a fair society is being formed through Britain’s education system.

Considering what is meant by a fair society, it becomes evident that it is a complex notion, as suggested by Ruitenberg and Vokey (2010) through advocating three principles, which include; Justice as harmony, equity and equality. Each of these, refer to different approaches that a society starts and finishes with. Justice as harmony considers how individuals are different and therefore is based upon the idea of people being at different levels due to their natural talents and arguably the social class that they are born into. The second potential definition of what drives a fair society is justice as equity, which relates to people having their individual needs met and considers all as unique. The final principle involves society all being treated equally (Smith, 2012), all of which could work towards eliminating Britain’s gender and socio-economic gap. This particular model demonstrates that defining the term ‘fair’ is difficult and is often dependent on political ideology and the context in which the principles are being applied.

One particular aspect of Britain’s system is regarding the idea of inclusion and Special Educational Need Schools (SEN). There is an on-going debate around this subject, whereby the definition of inclusion varies. The NAHT union for school leaders explains inclusion as a process which is focused on the environment that will include a child the most and will lead to a greater impact in their sense of belonging and academic achievement (Cigman, 2007). Inclusion also seeks to improve a child’s social and emotional development, many of which argue that this can be enabled by attending a mainstream school. This is due to the ideology of everyone being treated equally, reflecting on the idea of justice as equality. However, there is growing evidence to suggest that victimisation and bullying are more likely to be experienced by children with SEN in a mainstream setting (Fink et al., 2014, p. 611). In addition to this, “insufficient numbers and insufficient training remain major obstacles“ for mainstream education (Matheson, 2014, p. 329). This suggests that due to the lack of funding received and unlike SEN schools, mainstream schools are unable to cater for all individual needs. This demonstrates that SEN schools portray justice as equity to create a fair society, through children having greater opportunities within a SEN school (Cole and Hill, 2001, p. 241).

Beneath the surface however, there are many aspects that could contradict the notion of education helping to form a fair society. One element observed that appears to highlight how education is not helping to create a just society is the gender attainment within schools. Data collated from GCSE results in secondary education has shown that the attainment level of boys is “consistently lower than that of girls” (Smith, 2012, p. 61). This demonstrates that there are still gender inequalities within Britain’s education system, which could arguably be an explanation...
for the gender pay gap. However, regardless of there being a higher female attainment rate, they still ear
in less than the equivalent male, whereby figures show in 2011 there was a gap of 14.9% (Fawcett Society).

Eden proposes that gender is continually being studied alongside pupil attainment, but that this varies according to society (2012, p. 43). This appears to explain how society’s views on gender, influences the performance of children and the quality of education they receive. Similar to Eden’s view, one potential reason for the attainment differences is the pressure that is placed on gender roles. Arthur and Davies argued that; “boys display disruptive or aggressive behaviour...to maintain an appropriately ‘masculine’ identity” (2009, p. 54). Although this relates to society influencing, this observation can also be linked to the potential educational bias that Sundaram discusses, whereby there are arguments to suggest that teacher’s favour girls in a classroom (2009, p. 55). Considering this possible fault within the education system, Coughlan attempts to reflect on why there is a possible teacher bias. In the BBC article, Coughlan explains that it is due to girls generally being better behaved and less negative about school and even if a boys’ work is just as good, a higher grade is more probable to go to a girl (2015). As a result of educators’ attitudes towards gender and the pressures of gender roles, Britain’s current education system appears to be encouraging the gender in-qualities within an unfair society, through not addressing such a prominent issue.

Interlinked with the issue of gender inequality, is the apparent racism that still exists in schools today. Through his study Gillborn suggested; “race inequalities...are more persistent than is imagined by most policymakers and commentators” (2008, p. 45). Like with gender, this view is based upon the ethnic achievement levels, where the estimated year in which the gap will be closed is in 2064, due to percentages increasing an average of 1.1% per year from 1989 to 2004 (Gillborn, 2008, p. 67). This demonstrates the stark differences between ethnic minority students and white students, which greatly highlights the issue of racism within Britain’s education system.

Gillborn (2008) mentions how race inequalities are more apparent than people seem to notice; one possible reason for this is based upon the theory of colour-blind racial ideology (CBRI). This refers to educators and peers denying the projecting issue of racism (Neville et al., 2014) and as suggested, being blind to colour and a learner’s ethnicity. From this, the perspective of justice as equality appears to be the desired outcome, however it implies the importance of still recognising a person’s ethnicity. It could therefore be argued that the concept of justice as equity should also be applied too. Stevenson (2012) proposed that the black and minority ethnic level of under-attainment could be justified “under the smokescreen of ‘political correctness’ or for fear of saying the wrong thing”. Such a statement could be reflected on the idea of colour-blindness, where educators are also afraid of being seen as racist through their actions and saying the ‘wrong thing’. Alongside the concept of being colour-blind towards race, statistics have shown that black minoring students are more likely to be permanently excluded from a British school, than white students (Gillborn, 2008). This is another example of how the education
system today still reflects racist behaviour and therefore how unfair learning is in today’s society.

Therefore, to conclude; the once simplified principles of justice appear to be far more complex in determining what defines a fair society. From observing three elements of Britain’s education system, although the concept of SEN schools can be seen as meeting the specifications of justice as equity, it does not meet the other two principles. Similar to this the issues of gender and racism are highlighted as key aspects within the system that should to be fully addressed. Creasy (2012) explained that despite legislation being introduced, the problem of bias education is worse today than it was ten years ago. As a result of Britain’s education seeming to not tackle problems, low attainment is leading to a lack of opportunities being available, such as career options. This in turn is impacting on individual’s socio-economic status and therefore affecting the desire of an increase in social mobility. Montessori’s belief was that education could be used as a weapon for peace (1992, p. 30). This way of thinking could arguably be what is needed to improve Britain’s education system and help to create a fair society.

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References


