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Rethinking social justice in education: an epistemological approach

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Summary

There are many different notions of social justice in education. For example, some argue that social justice in education means giving individuals the opportunity to succeed; for others, it means seeking equality of outcome so that everyone does succeed. So great is the diversity of views is that it has been suggested the term has become meaningless, or that it can mean anything people want it to mean. This has led some to argue that trying to define social justice in education is a hopeless task.

This chapter argues that an approach informed by the later philosophy of Wittgenstein can be helpful in dealing with such issues. In particular, attention is focussed on Wittgenstein's epistemology and theory of meaning in the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is argued that these are helpful in understanding the multiplicity of meanings of the term social justice in education. This multiplicity however, it is argued, does not lead to a situation where the term can mean anything its users want it to mean. Nor does it lead to a situation where all attempts to define the term are ruled out, or where only one definition is acceptable, presumably to be imposed on all users of the term. Instead, the significance of contextual understanding and meaning in different language-games is highlighted. Wittgenstein's theory of meaning is then allied to Gallie's notion of an essentially contested concept to advance the idea of engagement between those with different views, and of the need to re-contextualise rather than de-contextualise the notion of social justice in education.

Key words:

Wittgenstein, Education, Epistemology, Language-games, Philosophy,

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> It is by no means obvious that someone interested in politics and society needs to concern himself [or herself] with philosophy; nor that, in particular, he [or she] has anything to learn from… [a] philosopher like Ludwig Wittgenstein, who never wrote about such topics at all (Pitkin, 1972/1993, p. 1).

Introduction

There are many different notions of 'social justice', as has been highlighted by Theoharis (2007) and others, and there is certainly no shortage of definitions and ideas about what social justice in education might mean. For example, in 2009, the *Handbook of Social Justice in Education* (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009a) contained chapters on such issues as race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, youth and social justice, globalisation, and classrooms and pedagogy. And the handbook within which this chapter is itself to be found covers a range of diverse topics. The notion of social justice in education stretches wide, with links made to ideas of inclusion, special needs, society, disabilities, religions, sexual orientation, human rights, compassion, employment, fulfilling societal roles, distribution of wealth, opportunities, and so on. So great is this diversity of meanings that, for some, the term 'social justice' has become a code for "good things no one needs to argue for, and no one dare be against" (Goldberg, 2014, 1:10). Goldberg argues that if one were to ask 10 "liberals" what they mean by social justice, one would get 10 different answers, ranging from equal access to education, to a right to housing, gay rights, women's rights, universal healthcare, income

equality, racial equality, child welfare, dignity, and fairness. Why is this? For Goldberg it is because "Social justice means anything its champions want it to mean" (Goldberg, 2014, 0:30). In turning to address social justice in education, it is pertinent to note that within the United Kingdom (UK), education is a devolved issue and so henceforth this chapter will focus on the situation in England and, where the context differs, that will be made explicit.

Social justice in education in England

In the UK, some notion of social justice has, at least outwardly, a high political profile (Lister, 2007, p. 113), although to what extent historical actions feed through into today's contexts remains a matter of debate – see Blackburn and Marsh (1991, p. 507), for example. The notion of social justice that pervaded the English school system from 1944 to the mid-1980s was, it has been argued "broadly shaped by an ideology and set of languages, policies and practices which together made up what can loosely be categorised as a welfarist settlement" (Gewirtz, 2002, p. 1), where the mood at the time, after the ending of World War 2 was one of social justice (Jones, 2016), and where the governments of the day wanted to use the 1944 Education Act to build "the new Jerusalem" (Blatchford, 2014, 22 April). Arguably, the move away from this agenda began in 1979 (Meredith, 1996) with the election of Margaret Thatcher as the British Prime Minister, and where the welfarist agenda changed to be "replaced by formal commitments to market 'democracy' and competitive individualism" (Gewirtz, 2002, p. 2) although, as shown below, this distinction between these views of social justice was highlighted much earlier by, for example, Gallie (1956, p. 187). In the English school system, this break from the welfarist perspective is perhaps more easily demarcated by the 1988 Education Reform Act, which was based on neoliberal policies (Jones, 2016). The child was no longer at the heart of education, but was replaced by the needs of industry and the economy (Weiner, 1997). However, the phrase 'social justice' is

still used in political debates about education and, according to one report, is "the buzz phrase of education ministers" (Tickle, 2015, 3 Nov). In this context, the meaning of 'social justice' or, rather, "*real* social justice" (Department for Education & Morgan, 2015 (emphasis added)), is characterised by the commitment to "ensuring all pupils have access to a world class education … where everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their high aspirations" (Department for Education & Morgan, 2015). Such a view is representative of the neo-liberal approach that has come to dominate the political approach to social justice in education, both in England and elsewhere, other examples being Australia and New Zealand (Davies & Bansel, 2007), the United States (Apple, 2006), Brazil (Gandin, 2007), and India (Chopra, 2003). The domination of this approach has been criticised by some; from the perspective of New Zealand, the

> long cherished promise of a better, more free and more just society through increasingly inclusive public education, albeit largely elusive, engaged educational imagination through much of the twentieth century. This vision, however, has been eroded of late with the rise of neo-liberal ideologies that now dominate the educational discourse the world over …. The attendant ascendency of standardized performance measures in schools, increased surveillance, control of curricula, and emphasis on efficiency, outcomes and skills in teacher education has profound effects on defining what counts as responsive or effective teaching, seriously undermining the educational responses to issues of equity and social justice (Kaur, 2012, p. 485).

In this scenario, the notion of social justice in education has come to have a different meaning, one which focusses on individual effort and ability (Gandin, 2006; Pinto et al., 2012).

Evidence of this in the context of the English state school system can be seen in three examples of speeches made by recent Secretaries of State for Education, in England. The first of these comes from Michael Gove who, when Secretary of State for Education, said

> And there are - thankfully - many state schools where children from poor backgrounds, who may have been dismissed as unacademic, perform brilliantly… Why do these schools succeed, transforming poor children's lives and life chances, for good? … Because they share a single common denominator - a single-minded focus on teaching. On recruiting the best candidates, giving them the best training and development; maximising the time children spend being instructed by passionate experts in the disciplines of rigorous thought (Gove, 2013, online).

Here it can be seen in Gove's remarks that "poor backgrounds" are considered to be no barrier to brilliant achievement. Social justice (here narrowly defined in terms of school performance) is to be achieved if individual schools, and individual teachers, focus single-mindedly on teaching and learning. The implication is clear; if this type of social justice is not achieved, it will have been the fault of individual schools and individual teachers who have "dismissed" these children as "unacademic".

A similar approach can be seen in the perspective of a subsequent Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening, when she said:

> I grew up in a working class family, I was one of those working-class kids. There were two things I really believed in from the word go. One was a fundamental fairness in the link between effort and reward and wanting to understand that if I was willing to put that time in, put the persistence in, that I would be able to see some results for that. The other thing I believed in was a meritocracy. Because I think talent is spread evenly throughout our country, throughout our communities; and fundamentally our country would be better the more we can unlock all of that. When you put those things together, a strong link between effort and reward, a real meritocracy, then you have empowered people. And when you have empowered people you have an empowered country. And I think when you've got empowered people you have stronger productivity and that's something that all of the organisations that are part of this Index today have fundamentally understood. It's a virtuous circle in the end. I happen to think, as

> well, that this isn't just the smart thing to do. It's not just about a business case for companies or for organisations. It is the right thing to do. A more socially mobile Britain will be a happier place. Communities will be stronger when we achieve that. I think we can change the internal plumbing of our country to make it more socially mobile (Greening, 2017, online).

Here again, the emphasis is on the individual; the theme is, 'If I can do it, anyone can do it'. Here is the meritocratic view writ large: effort plus talent equals reward. Success is about empowering the individual. And success here is seen in economic terms – leading to greater productivity. It is a business case: an example of what Reay had referred to five years earlier in commenting that "the economic ends of education are transcendent" (Reay, 2012, p. 589).

More recently, Greening's successor as Secretary of State for Education, Damian Hinds said:

> All too often, the expectations for the results that would be achieved by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were not high enough. There was a shift toward alternative qualifications, often targeted toward those people. But it turned out those qualifications were not as highly regarded and did not have the same worth in the jobs market and in society as the more traditional qualifications. And so that could unfortunately limit the possibilities that those young people would have…
>
> There's so much else for all of us to learn from one another, and so many challenges that we share in our different countries. For example, closing the attainment gap, spreading education opportunity ever wider to disadvantaged groups…
>
> That you believe you can achieve, that you stick with the task at hand, that you understand the link there is between the effort you make now and the reward that may come in future – albeit distant and uncertain – and the resilience, the ability to bounce back from the knocks that inevitably life brings to all of us (Hinds, 2018, online).

Here once more, the emphasis is on the individual. The blame for low achievement by children from disadvantaged backgrounds rests with those who had, supposedly, low expectations of them, presumably teachers and schools and, by implication, the individual children themselves if they did not "stick with the task in hand", understand the link between effort and reward, or have sufficient resilience. Individuals need to show personal ambition for achieving social mobility and social justice (Allen, 2011). In this context, the call by the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in 2018, for teenagers to take on Saturday jobs to help them prepare for work (as reported by McCann, 2018) comes as no surprise, nor does the fact that the Secretary of State gave as support for her argument her own experience of working in the family business and a bistro when she was still in education.

For these sorts of reasons, Reay (2012) considers that 'social justice' is a concept that has a much 'weaker' meaning than hitherto was the case, and that, when it does make an appearance, "social injustices in education and their remediation are seen to be the responsibility of the individual suffering the injustice rather than the collective responsibility of society" (Reay, 2012, p. 588). Where social injustices are recognised, in education and elsewhere, the 'solutions' are grounded in a neoliberal discourse, where "the solution for inequality is better inequality" (Littler, 2018, p. 100).

The notion that there are strong and weak meanings is one that has been noted by others, for example Banta (2016) and Gewirtz (1998). For Gewirtz, the 'weak' meaning of social justice emphasises opportunities for individuals to succeed and social justice does not therefore need to lead to equality of outcome, whereas the strong meaning seeks to ensure equality of outcome, and also that everyone does succeed (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 472). In current political discourse in England therefore, far from the rise of the meritocracy being seen in its original sense, as a critique (Young, 2001) it has come to be regarded by some as a virtue, perhaps because

> the commodification of education is linked to the emergence of an epistemological fallacy: it may help to create an illusion of equality whilst masking the persistence of old inequalities. By giving families greater responsibility for the type of education received by their children, negative outcomes can be attributed to poor choices on the part of the parents as customers. As a consequence, the state is able to relinquish some of its traditional responsibilities as the provider of an educational system based on social justice and underpinned by meritocratic principles (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, p. 24).

With the 'strong' version now largely marginalised from current political discourse in England (Reay, 2012, p. 588), the prevailing approach is one of personal choice, and the assumption that those individuals who have the requisite abilities and skills, and who work hard, will succeed. Society is depicted as a meritocracy in which each individual has the power to determine his or her fate, and where such success is defined very largely in economic terms. Leite (2013, p. 1) has commented upon the "voracious power Neo-Liberalism has over all types of policy making and opportunistic advancement of certain political strategies"; the message is that citizens are expected above all to become 'strivers' (McRobbie, 2013, p. 120); merit results from 'effort plus ability' (Allen, 2011, p. 1).

What are the implications of such a change? One might be that, if this 'weaker', meritocratic, vision of social justice is accepted, or its imposition as the accepted doctrine goes unchallenged, then those who do not rise through the system are made to blame themselves for their perceived lack of effort or merit (Allen, 2011, p. 4). In terms of social justice in education, the meritocratic approach can allow the state to blame parents, children and teachers for any failings. As a further example of this trend, a recently published document of indicators of the educational attainment of disadvantaged children focuses on the relationship of educational attainment to 'workless households' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2018). Such a view, identified in relation to an earlier government paper on social justice, argues Lister, gives no explicit recognition of financial poverty, nor does it

recognise that “two-thirds of children in poverty have a working parent” (Lister, 2017, p. 7). What the ‘weaker’ meritocratic view ignores, according to those who believe in a strong view of social justice, is that what is presented is merely an illusion of choice and that deep-seated inequalities are masked (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007, p. 14). Some of the effects of such inequalities have been reported by the National Education Union and the Child Poverty Action Group (NEU & CPAG, 2018) who describe how many schools are now having to provide food, clothing, and emergency loans to poor families, subsidising breakfast clubs, and enrichment activities, and that individual teachers, school leaders and teaching assistants are

> providing a range of essential items for their pupils and students, including food, books, stationery, PE kit, uniform, sanitary protection, personal hygiene products and transport costs (NEU & CPAG, 2018).

As is to be expected, the argument put forward by advocates of the ‘weaker’ form of social justice, as expressed by the DfE in response to the NEU/CPAG research is reported as follows:

> The Department for Education said it wanted to create a country where everyone could go as far as their talents could take them (Richardson, 2018, online).

It thus seems fair to comment, as one writer has done, that there are many definitions of social justice in education, “ranging from teaching tolerance to advocating for transformation of oppressive structures” (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014, p. 7). This diversity of meanings led another critic to suggest some years earlier that “the minute one begins to define social justice, one runs into embarrassing intellectual difficulties” (Novak, 2000, online). This chapter will address this issue, and suggest that there is a way out of such “embarrassing intellectual difficulties”. It will take as a guide the approach adopted by Gilroy

in relation to lifelong learning (Gilroy, 2012) and apply that approach to the notion of social justice in education.

Rethinking social justice in education

Given the complexity of the meanings described above, one possible approach in considering the notion of social justice might be to set out to give a definition to which everyone could subscribe. Even here, it seems some qualification might be needed however, for what might pass as an acceptable definition of social justice *in education* may not prove acceptable for defining social justice in another field. So even at this early stage of consideration, the task of finding a definition acceptable to all would seem daunting, if not impossible. Perhaps the best that could be hoped for is to be able to very specifically narrow down the uses of the term, and confine its use to specific groups or to specific fields, such as education. If internally consistent and coherent, then this may seem a way forward.

One such attempt can be seen in the Preface to the *Handbook of Social Justice in Education* (Ayers et al., 2009a), where the authors argue that social justice education rests on three pillars or principles of equity, activism, and social literacy and thus embraces the 3Rs of being relevant, rigorous, and revolutionary (Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009b, p. xiv). However, a further issue immediately becomes apparent; namely that those terms themselves then require further elaboration. To take as one example the 'principle of equity', for these authors, equity involves

> the principle of fairness, equal access to the most challenging and nourishing educational experiences, the demand that what the most privileged and enlightened are able to provide for their children must be the standard for what is made available to all children… [and] equitable outcomes, and somehow redressing historical and embedded injustices (Ayers et al., 2009b, p. xiv).

This further elaboration, of course, then itself requires further elaboration in order to explicate the notions it lists, and so the definition runs the risk of falling into an infinite regress of explanations and definitions.

Another example illustrates a related problem in coming to a definition. Fook (2014), after reviewing two definitions of social justice, concludes that social justice involves a particular set of social values, the translation of those values into particular objectives, and then the enacting of those values into particular policies (Fook, 2014, p. 161). This can be seen as an example of an approach which starts by setting out by describing how the term in question is used, and then claims to identify common features which can then define the term under consideration.

Why is this a problem? It is a problem because any attempt to set out what the term 'social justice', or 'social justice in education', *really* means (see, for example, Dell'Angelo (2014)) or to define what is meant by "*real* social justice" (Department for Education & Morgan, 2015, emphasis added) is, as Gilroy has argued, to adopt a now discredited essentialist approach to meaning (Gilroy, 2012, p. 54). In addition, an approach which starts out as an apparently purely *descriptive* task, then becomes a *prescriptive* one, defining how the term should be used, and outlawing (implicitly or explicitly) other meanings. If this is done, then alternative views can be dismissed as irrelevant, as Haidt and Graham (2007, pp. 110-112) have shown.

An alternative approach would be to accept that the term has so many meanings that it is, effectively, meaningless (Gilroy, 2012, p. 53). However, as has been argued elsewhere (Newman, 2017, p. 80), such an approach is a 'counsel of despair', and flies in the face of the fact that the phrase does have many different and inter-related meanings to different groups.

Both extremes seem to give a situation where the term is either so narrow as to be meaningless outside of a very small specific context, or so broad as to be effectively

meaningless. How can we resolve this difficulty? As Gilroy argued (Gilroy, 2012, p. 54), we need to identify a theory of meaning which can account for the plurality of meanings already identified, without succumbing to the idea that social justice can mean "anything its champions want it to mean" (Goldberg, 2014, 0:30). What is needed, therefore, is an epistemology which recognises the importance of social agreement and understanding in developing meaning. It is the contention here that one such epistemology capable of giving us an insight into these aspects is that suggested by the later philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein: An epistemological approach

Here we need to draw a distinction between work dating from different periods in Wittgenstein's life. There is widespread agreement that his work can be thought of as representing his early and later philosophy, with some arguing that there is also a middle or transitional stage (Newman, 1999, p. 89). Attention here will focus on his later philosophy, and, in particular, aspects of his philosophy as represented by the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1958), henceforth *PI* [1]. It will be shown that the Wittgensteinian approach is not concerned with setting up a new theory, but with giving a perspicacious view of our use of language (*PI*, § 122, p. 49e). Therefore, in order to understand Wittgenstein's epistemology, what is needed first is an understanding of his view of language and, in particular, his theory of meaning (McGinn, 1984, p. xi), as it is the contention here that any epistemology presupposes a theory of meaning.

One of the most well-known notions in Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that of 'language-games', and the fact that it appears early in *Philosophical Investigations* is perhaps an indication that it is a key term in his later philosophy (Shawver, 2007). As Shawver argues, however, this term has several related meanings, and this is consistent with another example that Wittgenstein brings forward to help him make the point that words or phrases

do not need to have one ‘essential’ or ‘objective’ meaning in order to have a use. So, using the term ‘games’, Wittgenstein remarks:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don’t say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don’t think, but look! (*PI*, § 66, p. 31e).

Instead, suggests Wittgenstein, when we *look* at different games, we *see* “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing; sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail” (*PI*, § 66, p. 32e). Wittgenstein continues:

> I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblance” (*PI*, § 67, p. 32e).

Wittgenstein gives some examples of language-games in the following:

> Giving orders and obeying them—
> Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—
> Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—
> Reporting an event—
> Speculating about an event—
> Forming and testing a hypothesis—
> Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—
> Making up a story; and reading it—
> Play-acting—
> Singing catches—
> Guessing riddles—
> Making a joke; telling it—
> Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—

Translating from one language into another—
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (*PI,* § 23, pp. 11e-12e).

These different language-games form a complicated network (just as 'games' do), some with close similarities, some less so.

For Wittgenstein, "the term 'language-*game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that *speaking* of language is part of an activity" (*PI,* § 23, p. 10e). It is the whole context which provides the 'frame of reference' for deciding on the meaning of any particular linguistic or non-linguistic behaviour (Gilroy, 2012, p. 55); language is part of a social whole, consisting of both verbal and non-verbal behaviours in specific contexts, in particular times and places (*PI,* § 7, p. 5e; § 23, p. 11e). Here is a recognition that the meaning of the same words and actions in different language-games can be subtly different (and sometimes very different), summed up by the phrase from *King Lear* that Wittgenstein considered using as a theme for the *Philosophical Investigations* (Drury, 1981, p. 171): "I'll teach you differences". Within different language-games there are different conventions or rules for the meanings of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Some of these rules will be explicit; others implicit. Some will be obvious; others less so. Sometimes these rules will just be used; sometimes they will need to be explained (Gilroy, 2012, p. 56). Meanings "are rule and criteria dependent in subtle and complex ways" (Gilroy, 2012, p. 56).

This social dimension to meanings is in marked contrast not only to the notion that words have one 'essential', 'objective, or central meaning, but also to the notion that words could have meaning due to some private or introspective reference. The subtleties of Wittgenstein's argument in rejecting such an idea have been detailed elsewhere (Newman, 1999, pp. 97-108) but, in short, the simple reason for rejecting the private approach to meaning is that, if words have meaning by some sort of private reference, then whatever *seems* right is going to *be* right. Wittgenstein writes that

> to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it (*PI*, § 202, p. 81e).

One consequence of this remark is that a so-called 'private language' cannot be considered a language. There will be no public check on the use or meaning of any term, and so it cannot be considered to be a *language* (Malcolm, 1987, pp. 41-43). Instead, for Wittgenstein, "'obeying a rule' is a practice" (*PI,* § 202, p. 81e), and

> the solution to any difficulties concerning words and their meaning is not to "think" about them on some abstract plane, but rather to "recognise their workings" in the "rough ground" of human activity (Moore, 2014, p. A-97).

It is to this 'rough ground' of 'social justice in education' that this chapter now returns.

Social justice as an essentially contested concept?

This chapter has shown that the term 'social justice in education' has many different meanings in the 'rough ground' of human activity, and that some argue that the term has so many meanings that it is, effectively, meaningless. At this juncture, it seems timely to revisit an earlier discussion (Newman, 1999, pp. 184-187) of Gallie's notion of essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1956). Gallie (1956, p. 167) suggested that there are some terms, the meaning of which may be contested, and that philosophers have traditionally tried to elucidate such meaning in one of three ways. The first of these is where a philosopher "might in some way discover, and persuade others that he had discovered, a meaning of the hitherto contested concept to which all could henceforward agree" (Gallie, 1956, p. 167). The second way would be for the philosopher to "propose a meaning for the contested term to which… the disputants might decide henceforth to conform" (Gallie, 1956, p. 167). The third way

could be for the philosopher to "claim to prove or explain the necessity…of the contested character of the concept in question" (Gallie, 1956, p. 167).

However, argued Gallie, "effective philosophical elucidations are likely to be of a much more complicated and elusive character than any of the above" (Gallie, 1956, pp. 167-168), and the idea of philosophy as being able to eliminate conceptual confusions has been repudiated (Gallie, 1956, p. 168). Nevertheless, argued Gallie, in regard to the third way mentioned above, there are some concepts related to organized or semi-organized human activities, the proper use of which are disputed (Gallie, 1956, p. 168). Gallie suggested that any such concept must be "*appraisive* in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement" (Gallie, 1956, p. 171), "internally complex" (Gallie, 1956, p. 171), "*initially* variously describable" and be "open" in character (Gallie, 1956, p. 172), by which he meant of "a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances" (Gallie, 1956, p. 172), and where each party recognizes that the term in question is disputed and "have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question" (Gallie, 1956, p. 172). He also argues that any such term must derive from an acknowledged exemplar, and that the continuous competition for acknowledgement as between the contestant users of the concept enables the original exemplar's achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion (Gallie, 1956, p. 180). As examples of such concepts, Gallie chose the concepts of Art, of Democracy, of Social Justice, and of adherence to or participation in a particular religion (Gallie, 1956, p. 180). Gallie argued that

> when we examine the different uses of these terms and the characteristic arguments in which they figure we soon see that there is no one clearly definable general use of any of them which can be set up as the correct or standard use (Gallie, 1956, p. 168).

Rather, he argued, terms such as ‘social justice’, of ‘work of art’, or ‘democracy’ have related uses and meanings, for different social groupings (Gallie, 1956, p. 168). In relation to social justice, Gallie argued that there appeared (at the time he was writing) to be two major popular uses – one where social justice consisted in “social arrangements… whereby the meritorious receives his [or her] commutative due” (Gallie, 1956, p. 187), and a second which

> rests upon, in the sense of presupposing, the ideas (or ideals) of co-operation, to provide the necessities of a worthwhile human life, and of distribution of products to assure such a life to all who co-operate” (Gallie, 1956, p. 187).

These two descriptions, Gallie terms ‘liberal’ and ‘socialist’ respectively (Gallie, 1956, p. 187), and these today can be linked to the ‘neoliberal’ and ‘welfarist’ perspectives to which reference has already been made.

The situation which Gallie described concerning the disputed use of a concept is just that which has been identified here in regard to the notion of social justice in education. Moreover, Gallie’s description of essentially contested concepts is a description which is consistent with the Wittgensteinian description of language and meaning that has here been outlined. There can be little doubt that the notion that social justice in education is appraisive. We have seen too that the nature of that achievement is internally complex involving, as it does, the ability to explain, to justify, to offer reasons, to demonstrate, and to adapt to new circumstances. It has also been argued that what is to count as social justice in education is liable to be judged in the light of the particular circumstances prevailing in specific contexts; such a view is consistent with Gallie’s notion that the concept will be initially variously describable and that, prior to contextualization, there will be nothing absurd or contradictory in any one of a number of possible descriptions of social justice in education (Gallie, 1956, p. 172). As such, social justice in education meets Gallie’s fourth semi-formal condition, namely that it is ‘open’ in character, by which Gallie meant that the accredited achievement

must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances, and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance (Gallie, 1956, p. 172). We have also seen that, as Gallie argued, in the case of an essentially contested concept, those who use the term in question do so with at least some appreciation that their use of it is contested by some others, and with some recognition of the criteria which those other users are taking as pertinent to their use of the concept. This point Gallie summarized in terms of proposing that those who use an essentially contested concept do so with the appreciation that their use of it has to be argued for and defended against other uses.

Applying Wittgenstein's and Gallie's ideas to the notion of social justice in education, we have here an explanation for the many different meanings in the many varied contexts in which the term 'social justice' is used, including the contexts of education. We do not need to examine all actual and possible uses of the term (if, indeed, that was possible) to try to find a single overarching and all-encompassing definition. When we think about social justice in education, we may initially be tempted to think that there must be something in common to all such uses which determines its 'essential nature'. But when we look rather than think (*PI*, § 66, p. 31e) we see that there is no one concept or meaning of the term 'social justice', just as there is no one thing that is common to all of the things that are called 'games' (Malcolm, 1993, p. 42). Consequently,

> A philosophical theory about *the meaning* of … [the term 'social justice'] – an attempt to give an analytic definition of the concept …is bound to be a non-starter" (Malcolm, 1993, p. 46).

But this does not mean that we need to accept that 'social justice' can mean anything to anybody. Rather we have the notion of "different social realities" (Moore, 2014, p. A-96), and "the irregularity, the 'raggedness', that confronts us… [in the use of the phrase 'social

justice'] … is how it actually *is*. There is no unity *behind* the irregularity" (Malcolm, 1993, p. 47) .

If, following Wittgenstein, we recognise that the meaning of such terms, and their uses, can differ in different language games, then it follows that in order to understand the meanings of those terms, we need to examine closely their uses in the different language games, recognising that shared meanings are possible within particular social contexts, and acknowledging that meanings may well be different in other social contexts (Gilroy & Wilcox, 1997, p. 30). Many of the arguments of one language-game may appear wrong or immoral to those in another language-game (Haidt & Graham, 2007, pp. 99-100). With this perspective, we can see that those attempts to define social justice in education which run the risk of falling into an infinite regress of explanations and definitions, can be reinterpreted as attempts to *describe* the use or uses of the term in the specific social context or contexts under consideration, and the supposed regress is halted by those particular social contexts and the actual uses of terms.

Conclusion

The perspective outlined here recognises the situation described by Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) (there in relation to the term 'inclusion', and to which reference is made by Hornby (2015), but here in relation to the term 'social justice in education'), that "the term … is used in so many different ways that it can mean different things to different people" (Hornby, 2015, p. 235) but rejects the implication that that the term therefore means "all things to all people" (Hornby, 2015, p. 235), that same phrase being used in relation to social justice by Thrupp and Tomlinson (2005, p. 549). It also rejects the view that "unless … [a term] is clearly defined it becomes meaningless" (Hornby, 2015, pp. 235-236). What *is* required though, is for the users of the term in any particular context to make clear their

understandings of the term, not least to those new to that particular language-game. We can place in this context the call for teacher educators (in England as elsewhere) to "develop a new professional community notion related to social justice" (Turhan, 2010, p. 668), and, for "teacher educators interested in social justice…[to] define the concept and come to a consensus about what social justice in teacher education means" (Banta, 2016, pp. iv-v).

What are the implications of the above for social justice in education? First, with the recognition of the theory of meaning and view of language taken comes, argued Gallie, a recognition that other views with which one may not agree are not lunatic or insane (Gallie, 1956, p. 193); that different views can be held and defended by the parties with what each claims are "convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification" (Gallie, 1956, p. 168), and that what are to count as convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification may themselves be in dispute (Gallie, 1956, pp. 191-192). There is also a recognition or, at least a hope, that those holding such different views are not 'trapped' by them, but can be persuaded to a greater or lesser extent by other views (Gallie, 1956, pp. 190-191); different groups will "have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question" (Gallie, 1956, p. 172). For Gallie, therein lies a danger:

> So long as contestant uses of any essentially contested concept believe…that their own use of it is the only one that can command honest and informed approval, they are likely to persist in the hope that they will ultimately persuade and convert all their opponents by logical means. But once let this cat out of the bag—i.e. the essential contestedness of the concept in question—then this harmless if deluded hope may well be replaced by a ruthless decision to cut the cackle, to damn the heretics, and to exterminate the unwanted (Gallie, 1956, pp. 193-194).

Just such a situation, it could be argued, has arisen with the notion of social justice in education where the prevailing neoliberal discourse has achieved the status of "an

unquestionable orthodoxy that operates as if it were the objective truth" (Patrick, 2013, p. 149). As Burman puts it; in neoliberal societies, "overt prescription moves over time to become covert normalisation, such that those who do not fit the norms are rendered deficient or pathological" (Burman, 2012, p. 431). Moreover, as Slee puts it (writing about inclusive education, but which applies equally well to the notion of social justice in education), "the absence of a language for inclusive education that stipulates its vocabulary and grammar increases the risk for political misappropriation" (Slee, 2001, p. 167). But, *contra* Reisch (2002, p. 343), it has been shown that there is no need to develop a single common meaning of the term in order to make progress. What *is* needed is a recognition of the "complexity and contestedness of achieving social justice in education" (Thrupp & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 549) and, rather than dismiss alternative views as either utopian or dystopian (Thrupp & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 550), to engage with those in different language-games. There is no reason to suppose that this is impossible; as has already been noted. What is involved is giving (as has already been suggested) some recognition of the criteria which those other users are taking as pertinent to their use of the concept, and being aware of the terms common to different language-games but which have different meanings and different uses, not least terms linked to social need, such as 'democracy' and 'education', as highlighted from the perspective of the USA by Apple (1999, p. 14). Some of these uses may be surprising, but this brings to mind again Drury's observation to which reference was made earlier, namely that Wittgenstein considered using a quotation from *King Lear* ('I'll teach you differences') as a motto for the *Philosophical Investigations* (Drury 1981, p.171), and of another phrase he considered for the same purpose: 'You'd be surprised'. Of the latter, Malcolm writes:

> 'You'd be surprised' would indeed be a fitting motto for the *Philosophical Investigations*. That is exactly what happens when an unexpected difference comes to light. One is surprised ... Even more than by differences in the use of

> different words, we are surprised by differences in the way in which the *same* word is used in different contexts (Malcolm, 1993, p. 44).

This might happen where, as Gandin puts it:

> Categories such as participation, democracy, collaboration, and solidarity, which are all historically connected with progressive social movements in education, are disarticulated from their previous meanings and rearticulated in the educational arena using the language and practices of marketization…. Those categories are now stripped from the meanings that linked them to specific struggles for justice and equality in society in general and in education in particular, and connected with categories like efficiency, productivity, and knowledge as commodity (Gandin, 2006, p. 219)

If this is so, then those who want to reconnect them to other language-games need to articulate and persuade others of the importance of doing so. The writing of books and articles (for example, Cochran-Smith (2004), Gewirtz (1998, p. 469), Littler (2018) and Morgaine (2014)), online articles (for example, Martin (2018)), government publications, political speeches (such as those to which reference has been made in this chapter), and so on, can all be seen as ways in which particular people and organisations make their understandings of the meaning of 'social justice in education' explicit to others. Different views need to be acknowledged and engaged with (Haidt & Graham, 2007, p. 113). As familiarity with various language games develops, the meanings of the actions and words in the different contexts become clearer. It can be seen that the rules of the language game of politics, of the media, of academic institutions, and so on, may have some important similarities, but also some important dissimilarities (Haidt & Graham, 2007, p. 108). From this perspective, that participants in different language games have different views of what 'social justice in education' means comes as no surprise, nor does that fact that these

differences inform critiques of, for example, teacher education for social justice, not only in England but elsewhere (Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell, 2009).

For these reasons, issues of social justice in education need to be *re*-contextualised, not *de*-contextualised, this being one point amongst many in a recent response to the English government's proposal to test pupils of reception age (children aged 4 to 5 years) to establish a baseline by which to measure their progress by the end of key stage 2 (children aged 11 years) (Goldstein, Moss, Sammons, Sinnott, & Stobart, 2018, pp. 16-18). Mahony and Hextall argued over 20 years ago in relation to what they considered to be issues of social justice,

> To talk in a decontextualised manner about 'pupils' … can make the activity of teaching appear deceptively simple. When we think of Angie who was sexually abused by her father, or Elavalagan who recently fled from Sri Lanka, or Sophie, 'a middle-class boffin' in a working-class school, then what it means to teach immediately becomes more complex. The same is true of teachers. They too act out of, are influenced by and in turn reconstitute or reshape social or political identities. Teaching involves relationships between people whose personal, social, economic, cultural and political identities and positionings are complex (Mahony & Hextall, 1997, pp. 142-143).

Similarly:

> Social class is a relational concept in which working-class experiences do not make sense unless they are contextualised within the wider class hierarchy (Reay, 2017, p. 131).

For these reasons, school improvement strategies too

> must be based on subtle appreciations of context, taking into account local social, demographic and economic factors, the school market and the institutional history (Lupton, 2005, p. 595).

Thus, contrary to the position proposed in the quotation cited at the head of this chapter, Wittgenstein's approach to meaning brings to the fore the wider notion of the *social* in understanding what different social groups mean by 'social justice in education', and how we may seek to develop greater understanding of, and shared meanings between, those playing different 'language-games'. Heightened sensitivity to the contextual nature of meaning helps maintain vigilance for those occasions when changes in terminology do not reflect any significant changes in the underlying substantive content (Kaur, 2012, p. 485), and also to those occasions when the terminology stays the same, but the substantive content changes. It is just these sorts of flexibilities that have been taken advantage of by some, not least by some politicians who, as has been shown already, often use terms which have an established meaning in one language game in another, where they give them different meanings (Slee, 2001, p. 167). This perspective helps explain the criticism that some uses of the term social justice and associated notions have become little more than 'buzz words' (Evans & Lunt, 2002, p. 3). It thus seems inevitable that the notion of social justice in education will be a matter of debate and discussion, whereby the different criteria or rules of the different groups and language games are advanced, asserted, and explicated in various ways, and where "each party continues to defend its case with what it claims to be convincing arguments, evidence and other forms of justification" (Gallie, 1956, p. 168). Recognition of such points, argued Gallie, will lead to a raising of the level of the quality of the arguments amongst the parties to the dispute; alternative positions will be given recognition "as of permanent potential critical value to one's own use or interpretation of the concept in question" (Gallie, 1956, p. 193). This chapter represents one attempt to give just such recognition to different understandings of 'social justice in education'.

Footnote:

1. Due to the posthumous publication of much of Wittgenstein's work, the traditional referencing conventions have, for in-text-references of his work, been replaced by the following:
   PI: *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1958), first published in 1953, written 1945-1949.
   Paragraph numbers where appropriate are shown thus: §

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