Introduction: The Important but Undertheorised Social Justice Perspective to Adult Education

Recently, the issue of social justice in adult and higher education has been gaining prominence among both policy makers and researchers. According to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNDP 2015, p. 19), one of the key sustainable development goals is “to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. The Incheon Declaration for Education 2030 declares that this goal “is inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development based on human rights and dignity; social justice; inclusion […] and shared responsibility” (UNESCO et al. 2015, p. 7). With regard to higher education, social justice has become a constituent part of the European Higher Education Area through the social dimension in higher education—which has been firmly prioritised within the Bologna Process since 2003 (Berlin Communiqué). The understanding of this social dimension, defined for the first time by the
London Communiqué in 2007, sets the very ambitious aim that the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations. The renewed European agenda for higher education also emphasises its social dimension and calls for “building inclusive and connected higher education systems” for the purpose of “ensuring that higher education is inclusive, open to talent from all backgrounds” (European Commission 2017, p. 6).

The social justice perspective has also emerged as an important research trend in studies on education, higher education included (Gewirtz 1998, 2006; Brighouse 2003; Walker 2003; North 2006; Zajda et al. 2006; Walker and Unterhalter 2007; Brennan and Naidoo 2008; Furlong and Cartmel 2009; Bask and Bask 2015). However, despite some valuable studies (e.g. Williams 2011; Devos 2011; Waller et al. 2011; Riddell et al. 2012; Francois 2014; Unterhalter 2014; Tuckett 2015; Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova 2017, 2020), the social justice implications related to adult education have still not been systematically or thoroughly discussed. That is why, albeit acknowledging the growing interest towards social justice in higher and adult education, some authors point out that “yet the depth and contours of the term [social justice] are not easily untangled”, and there is continuing uncertainty about the implications of social justice in the field of adult education (Johnson-Bailey et al. 2010, p. 346).

In addition, by discussing a wide range of principles and practices of social justice, Francois (2014) emphasises that the majority of philosophies on adult education have neither a specific nor a reformist perspective about the notion of social justice, which makes the question of measuring justice in adult education quite challenging. As Unterhalter (2014, p. 184) argues, an “indicator on participation, lifelong learning, equity, and empowerment” is “necessary for more comprehensively addressing education in a post-2015 agenda”. The serious drawbacks and challenges in the way the problem of social justice in adult education has been studied are quite obvious. At the theoretical level, there is a need for deepening and refining the conceptualisation of social justice regarding participation in adult and higher education. At the methodological and empirical levels, there is a need for going beyond the narrow focus on single measurements at country level or inequalities at the individual
level. Other challenges which have to be addressed are the predominant research being focused on singular dimensions of social inequality (e.g. social background measured with parents’ education) which do not allow for the multi-faceted nature of social justice (related to inequalities, based on occupational status, gender, age, etc.) to be taken into account.

The present chapter aims at providing new theoretical and evidence-based insights into our understanding of the complex character of social justice as it relates to participation in adult and higher education. More concretely, based on our previous study (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova 2017), we will: (1) conceptualise social equity as an important public good; (2) deepen the understanding of the multi-dimensional character of social justice regarding participation in adult education; (3) further develop and enrich the understanding of the inclusion and fairness aspects of equity in adult education by measuring them in relation to individuals’ employment status; and (4) empirically demonstrate the ‘access to what’ aspect of social justice in higher education.

Theoretical Approaches to Social Justice

To a great extent, differences in understanding social justice in adult and higher education reflect a variety of views on the very essence of social justice and how it is conceptualised. That is why, before focusing on social justice and adult education, it is worth having a glimpse at the emerging main trends in theoretical approaches to social justice.

It has been acknowledged that:

[t]he notion of social justice is relatively new. None of history’s great philosophers—not Plato or Aristotle, or Confucius or Averroes, or even Rousseau or Kant—saw the need to consider justice or the redress of injustices from a social perspective. The concept first surfaced in Western thought and political language in the wake of the industrial revolution and the parallel development of the socialist doctrine […] It was born as a revolutionary slogan embodying the ideals of progress and fraternity. (United Nations 2006, pp. 11–12)
In the second half of the twentieth century, some leading liberal and conservative thinkers, for example, Friedrich von Hayek, criticised the concept by stating that it did not mean anything, or it meant too many things (Hayek 1976). Recently, others have pointed out that “like ‘equality of opportunity’ or ‘choice’, ‘social justice’ is one of those politically malleable and essentially contested phrases which can mean all things to all people”, and it tends to suffer from “vagueness and oversimplification” (Thrupp and Tomlinson 2005, p. 549). The concept is also criticised as “often utilised as a catch-all phrase for aspects of injustice”, “as a weak and unfocussed term” (Waller et al. 2011, p. 511), which remains “highly political, fluid and slippery” (Griffiths 2003, p. 41), and as “taken as an unconditional good” with few attempts to define its meaning (Jackson 2011, p. 431).

One of the most influential approaches to how justice may be achieved was developed by John Rawls (1999 [1971]) in his theory of ‘justice as fairness’. It is based on the idea of establishing a hypothetical social contract which aims at contributing to the achievement of justice in society. This approach is focused on identifying perfectly just institutions and implies the identification of the right behaviour or right institutions. The metrics of justice in this Rawlsian theory are that of primary goods, which may be rights, liberties, opportunities, income, or wealth. Their distribution should be regulated by the principles of equal basic liberties, of fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle (ibid.). However, as Robeyns (2008, p. 410) points out, the “[i]deal theory sharpens our thinking on justice and serves as a guide that is indispensable in many cases, but it does not tell us how to reach that ideal of justice”. Rawlsian theory of justice is highly criticised by feminist theory for the claimed universalism of the social contract theory and its conception of the self as a disembedded, disembodied, abstract bearer of rights and duties. Okin (1989) asks the question ‘Justice for whom?’, and argues that the Rawlsian approach neglects gender.

Another serious criticism towards Rawlsian theory of justice and especially its utopian character is expressed by Amartya Sen (2006, 2009) within his capability approach. Sen, enormously intellectually indebted to Rawls, adheres to the idea that justice may be achieved on the basis of making comparisons between the different ways in which people’s lives
may be led, thereby ascertaining which are more or less just. In its nature, this implies making realisation-focused comparisons. According to Sen (2009, p. 401), justice is a “momentous concept” and comparative questions are inescapable for any theory of justice that intends to give some kind of guidance for public policy or personal behaviour. This ‘comparative’ approach focuses on ranking alternative social arrangements, instead of concentrating exclusively on the identification of a fully-just society. It is also concerned with human behaviour rather than assuming that, once institutions are perfectly arranged and perfect behaviour has been identified, people will simply follow it accordingly. Thus, Sen has a more realistic vision of how justice can be enhanced. He acknowledges that there is a possibility, even with just institutions, for injustices at the individual level and in people’s everyday lives.

Sen’s comparative approach to justice could contribute to identifying spaces of injustice and engaging in their removal. The informational basis of Sen’s theory of justice is human capability. As explained in Chap. 3, this capability should be understood as a special kind of freedom which refers to the alternative combinations that are feasible for a person to achieve. In this sense, capability is determined by the space of possibilities open to an individual—not in terms of some prior end, such as utility or initial conditions such as equality of primary goods, or resources. The capability is also constrained by so-called conversion factors which influence the capacity of people to convert the resources they have into a good way of living. By taking these conversion factors into account, the capability approach allows us when evaluating inequalities to consider both the individual-level characteristics and the institutional and macro-level features of the contexts. Scholars have explored the potential of the capability approach to address feminist concerns and questions aimed at the social contract theory of justice, for example, Robeyns (2003) referring to gender inequality.

Another approach to social justice has been developed by Nancy Fraser (2003). In Chap. 6, we presented her understanding of recognition as a matter of justice. For the present analysis, it is enough to recall that Fraser (2009) proposes a three-dimensional scale of justice which refers to redistribution, recognition, and representation. She argues that to conceive recognition as a matter of justice means to view it as an issue of social status. Such an understanding requires examination of the institutionalised
patterns of cultural value and whether they constitute actors as peers—who participate on par with one another in social life—or as inferior, invisible, excluded others. Fraser’s conceptualisation of recognition as a matter of justice draws attention to the obstacles that impede people from fully participating in social life. It is important to emphasise that she points not only to economic factors but to cultural ones, as well (Fraser 2005).

The Contribution of Adult Education to Social Equity as a Public Good

Social justice affirms the need for protecting human dignity and promoting equal opportunities for everybody and everyone. It provides a framework for assessing inequalities in societies. That is why social justice could be regarded as one of the most important public goods in contemporary societies.

In his seminal book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Piketty argues against the belief that wealth inequality will gradually decrease with industrialisation and economic growth. He admires both the intrinsic value of education and its role as a decisive factor of progress. Piketty insists that:

> the best way to reduce inequalities with respect to labor as well as to increase the average productivity of the labor force and the overall growth of the economy is surely to invest in education. (Piketty 2014, p. 265)

Piketty’s arguments about the role of education in reducing social inequalities have been met with criticism (e.g. Robertson 2016; Moeller and Tarlau 2016; Klees 2017). Nevertheless, his analysis has been enthusiastically welcomed by researchers on education as “an opportunity to revisit the question of education’s role in producing a more equal society in the twenty-first century” (Moeller and Tarlau 2016, p. 805).

Education can contribute to promoting social justice to the extent that it is organised and functions based on the principle of equality of educational opportunities. According to the OECD (2014, p. 193):
Equity in education means providing all students, regardless of their socio-economic status, with opportunities to benefit from education. Defined in this way, equity does not imply that everyone will have the same outcomes from education. It does mean, however, that students’ socio-economic status has little or no impact on their performance, and that all students, regardless of their background, are offered access to quality educational resources and opportunities to learn.

Referring to higher education, Marginson (2016, p. 95) states that the equity focus of policy “indicates the continuing importance of the democratic political notion of a common ‘public interest’ in which all are seen to have a stake”. That is why social equity in higher education “is a keystone collective benefit that underpins the production and distribution of many other public and private goods” (Marginson and Yang 2020, p. 42).

We argue that all three approaches presented in the previous section of this chapter—Rawlsian theory of justice as fairness, the capability approach, and Fraser’s understanding of recognition as a matter of justice—offer valuable ideas that are mutually enriching and provide a reliable basis for developing a thorough social justice perspective towards (adult) education. Thus, in her review of key theories of social justice and their implications for higher education, Wilson-Strydom (2015) outlines some aspects of Rawlsian theory that are useful for understanding social justice in higher education. Among them are “Rawls’ critique of unfair advantage and the related concept of meritocracy, as well as the idea that policy decisions should be made so that the worst-off benefit most” (ibid., p. 146). Fraser’s recognition theory is important too, as it goes beyond redistribution and allows for the significant role of the cultural and political dimensions of social justice in (adult) education to be highlighted. In turn, the capability approach brings to the fore the opportunities which different students have to achieve educational outcomes, as well as individuals’ agency and how it is enabled or constrained by different conversion factors.

The question of the contribution of adult education to promoting social justice as a public good is much more important than that of initial education because of the latter’s compulsory character. Social justice in adult education and the role of adult education for increasing justice in
society are complex, multi-dimensional phenomena. They reflect the entire organisation of adult educational systems—especially in terms of their social inclusiveness (at both entry and completion of education) and levels of stratification. Below we systematise the most important in our view dimensions of social justice in adult education.

**Inclusion and fairness.** Applying Sen’s approach to justice, Simon Marginson (2011) identifies two perspectives in which social equity in higher education has been recently conceptualised: inclusion and fairness. The inclusion perspective refers “to the significance of improvement in participation of any particular group, irrespective of how other groups have fared” (Clancy and Goastellec 2007, p. 146). The fairness perspective “implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances—for example gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin—should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential” and thus “access to, participation in and outcomes of tertiary education are based only on individuals’ innate ability and study effort” (Santiago et al. 2008, pp. 13–14). Thus, whereas the first approach “focuses on growth in the absolute number of people from hitherto under-represented socio-economic groups, as defined in terms of income measures or social or occupational status”, the second one concentrates on the proportional distribution of student places (or graduations) among different social groups (Marginson 2011, pp. 23–24).

We claim that both aspects—inclusion and fairness—are important, as they capture different dimensions of social justice regarding participation in higher and adult education. Moreover, they are irreducible, and that is why neither of them should be neglected. The inclusion aspect provides a general view of the increase in proportions of people from different social groups involved in adult education while fairness refers to the relative chance of representatives of different social groups of entering different types and programmes of adult education. When inclusion is pursued as a goal, each advance in the participation of persons from underrepresented groups represents a move forward. At the same time, achieving better fairness is more difficult and less visible: it requires structural improvement of representation in adult education from different social groups, that is, changes in the composition of the student body so that it better represents the diversity of the general population.
Social justice—for whom? The complexity of social justice when it comes to participation in higher and adult education is further reflected in the different ways both its aspects (inclusion and fairness) are revealed with regard to different social groups—that is, to groups differentiated on the basis of social background, completed initial education, occupational status, place of residence, age, or gender.

Social justice—where? Higher education and adult education are processes, sometimes long ones. People’s successful access to them does not always result in their successful completion. This is why we differentiate between social justice in access to higher and adult education and social justice in graduation. It is worth studying which factors influence social justice at these two points of higher and adult education and whether a degree of sustainability is involved.

Social justice—in relation to what? Diversity of students in higher and adult education cannot by itself be taken as an indicator of greater equity in participation because “the unevenness persists as regards to who studies what and where” (Archer 2007, p. 637). Special attention needs to be paid to the qualitative side of educational inequalities, that is, we should ask not only the question ‘Does this individual/group have access to adult education?’ but also ‘Access to what?’, that is, ‘To what kind of institution/programme of adult education does this individual/group have access?’ More concretely, this means focusing on the chances of students belonging to different social groups (differentiated on the basis of their social background, completed initial education, occupational status, place of residence, age, or gender) to participate in higher educational institutions, fields of study, degree types, or educational programmes—all of which differ with regard to the quality of education they offer and their prestige. This dimension of social justice is especially evident with regard to participation in higher education due to the stratified nature of contemporary higher education systems. Taking into account the differences in prestige and quality of education offered at different higher educational institutions, Marginson (2016, p. 77) argues that too many countries’ higher education systems “are so stratified as to reduce sharply—sometimes empty out—the value of participation for the majority of students”.

8 Equity for Whom, to What and Where...
In the following two sections of this chapter, we will provide some empirical manifestations of the multi-dimensional character of social justice regarding participation in adult and higher education. More concretely, on the basis of secondary data, we will analyse: (1) the inclusion and fairness aspects of social justice for employed and unemployed people; and (2) the ‘access to what’ aspect of social justice, that is, the involvement of students from low and high social backgrounds in higher educational fields which differ in their social prestige.

Social Justice in Participation of Employed and Unemployed People in Adult Education

In a previous study (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova 2017), we investigated inclusion and fairness in adult education for two social groups—people with low and high levels of education. The analysis in this chapter refers to two other social groups differentiated on the basis of their labour status—employed and unemployed—and their participation in one specific type of adult education—non-formal education.

Data and Indexes

We used data from the 2011 and 2016 waves of the Adult Education Survey (AES). The number of countries which participated in both the AES 2011 and the AES 2016 was 30. However, for Ireland, Luxembourg, Serbia, Sweden and the United Kingdom there were breaks in series regarding participation in non-formal education in the AES 2016 (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database Data code: trng_aes_100. [Extracted on: 10.8.2020]). This is why we have excluded the five of them from the following analysis. The levels of employment and unemployment of the population aged 25–64 of a given country in 2011 and 2016 were measured using Eurostat data that corresponded to these two groups for all 25 countries except Denmark due to break in series in 2016 for both employment and unemployment (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/
We calculated two indexes to capture social justice regarding participation in non-formal adult education at country level: an index of inclusion in participation in non-formal education (IincluNFE) and an index of fairness regarding participation in non-formal education (IfairNFE) for two social groups differentiated on the basis of their labour status—employed or unemployed. For the calculation of IincluNFE, we estimated binomial logistic regression models for non-formal adult education separately for all 25 countries, distinguishing whether people participated in non-formal education and training in the previous 12 months (1 = participated) or not (0 = not participated) as a dependent variable.

The main independent variable was current main labour status, measured by three categories: employed (1), unemployed (2), and inactive (3). We included gender, age, and educational attainment level in the models as control variables. We used one of the measures derived from the multivariate models: predicted probabilities for being either employed or unemployed. The IincluNFE is calculated as the ratio between predicted probabilities of a given social group in two temporal points—in our case, 2016 and 2011. An index above 1 indicates the increase of inclusion for a given social group within one and the same country for the above-described period of time, whereas an index below 1 shows a tendency towards excluding this group over time. An index value of 1 indicates that no advancement of inclusion was made by this group.

The IfairNFE measures how the representation of a given social group in adult education within a given country has changed over time. The IfairNFE was calculated as the ratio between the representation of a given social group at two temporal points—2016 and 2011. An IfairNFE index above 1 for the unemployed indicates a decrease in that group’s under-representation in adult education and, thus, more fairness in participation, whereas an index below 1 shows an increase in the underrepresentation of this group in adult education, that is, a tendency towards deteriorating fairness of participation among this group over time. For the employed group, an IfairNFE below 1 would mean that this group’s overrepresentation has decreased—thus, that the fairness of participation among this group has increased. An index of 1 indicates that no change in fairness...
was made by this group, whereas an index above 1 would mean an increase in overrepresentation, that is, a decrease in fairness of participation among this group in adult education.

Both aspects of social justice could also be assessed from a cross-national perspective; this means comparing the indexes of inclusion and fairness in adult education for different countries. It was possible to calculate the indexes for the employed and the unemployed within non-formal education for 24 countries.

We measured non-formal education as the proportion of adults who participated in at least one non-formal educational or training activity (such as courses, workshops and seminars, guided on-the-job training, or private lessons) during the previous 12 months.

**Participation and Representation Among Employed and Unemployed Persons in Non-Formal Adult Education**

Data from the AES 2011 show that the majority of adults participating in non-formal education are employed; the share of those who are unemployed is considerably lower. In some countries such as Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia, and Switzerland, less than 3% of adults who were participating in non-formal education were unemployed. The highest proportions of unemployed participants in adult non-formal education were in Spain and Greece, but even these countries’ percentage of unemployed participants in non-formal education was about 10.

Figure 8.1 presents the values of representation among employed and unemployed adults as of 2011 in non-formal adult education. The results indicate that in all countries, apart from Italy and Malta, unemployed adults are underrepresented in non-formal education, whereas the employed are overrepresented in all 25 countries. Despite this, there are country differences in the extent to which these two groups are represented in this type of adult education. In some countries, like Germany, and Switzerland, the representation of the employed is closest to their proportion in the general population. At the other extreme are Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia. With regard to unemployed adults,
their underrepresentation is relatively low in Norway and Spain, whereas Bulgaria and Slovakia feature their very high underrepresentation.

Inclusion in and Fairness of Participation Among Employed and Unemployed People in Adult Education

The analysis of the incluNFE for adults aged 25 to 64 years reveals that countries differ in terms of the inclusion advancement among various labour status groups (see Fig. 8.2). Thus, we observed non-formal education becoming more inclusive with regard to employed adults in the period between 2011 and 2016 in 16 countries, whereas in the case of the unemployed it became more inclusive in 10 countries. The figure also shows that non-formal education has achieved better inclusion with regard to unemployed adults as opposed to the employed only in four countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Hungary, and Switzerland).
The analysis of IfairNFE (Fig. 8.3) reveals that there is a decrease in the overrepresentation of employed adults, and their representation has become fairer in all countries, excepting Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain—where this overrepresentation increased, though only to a relatively small extent. Concerning fairness with regard to the representation of unemployed adults, the analysis shows that it increased in 11 countries, with the highest increases achieved in the Netherlands and the lowest in Austria, Estonia, and Latvia.

In order to more systematically describe the relationship between inclusion and fairness, we also conducted a correlation test. Its analysis reveals that there is no correlation between the advancement of inclusion among the unemployed in non-formal education and the advancement of fairness achieved by this group. With regard to employed adults, we found a moderate positive association between this group’s advancement in inclusion within non-formal education and changes in representation (Pearson’s $r = 0.418$), which was significant (at $p < 0.05$). These results show that more inclusion regarding participation in non-formal education
among the employed is associated with achieving better representation for the employed within this type of education. However, this is not the case for the unemployed.

Social Justice in Relation to What: Involvement of Students from Low and High Social Backgrounds in Different Higher Education Professional Fields

In this section, we will move on to another aspect of the multi-dimensional character of social justice as it relates to participation in adult education. More concretely, we will provide an empirically based analysis of low and
high-social-background students’ access to higher education fields of study which differ in their prestige. We will measure social background with father’s educational level.

In the context of expanding and diversifying higher education, this cannot be treated as a homogenous good (Kogan et al. 2011). Although there are differences among countries, higher education systems remain stratified everywhere. This undoubtedly has implications on social justice in higher education. In order to account for this, we have used data from the Bulgarian University Ranking System. The ranking contains information on 51 higher education institutions offering hundreds of majors, which are classified into 52 professional fields.

In the present chapter, we have used one of the sources for this ranking—a nationally representative survey of students. The survey was conducted in 2018 via a self-administered questionnaire among 18,631 students. The students were selected in a two-stage sampling procedure, with the professional fields and higher education institutions as clusters. We selected five professional fields: (1) pedagogy, (2) economics, (3) management and administration, (4) general engineering, and (5) medicine, dentistry and pharmacology as one combined field. We applied two selection criteria. Firstly, we selected professional fields which differ in their social prestige, measured with graduates’ levels of unemployment and monthly income. Thus, according to data from the ranking system, the unemployment rate among graduates of pedagogy was higher compared to that of those who had graduated from medicine, dentistry and pharmacology or economics; graduates in pedagogy also had the lowest monthly income in comparison to graduates from the other four fields. Secondly, we selected professional fields in which there was a high enough number of students from low educational backgrounds in order to be able to make a robust statistical analysis. Thus, for example, while law is among the most prestigious professional fields, there are very few law students who come from low educational backgrounds.

To analyse these data, we applied one of the measures of social equity in higher education—Usher and Medow’s equity index (2010) for different professional fields in a given country. This was calculated as a ratio between the percentage of males aged 45–64 in the general population of a country with a higher education degree and the percentage of the student body whose fathers have a higher education degree. This index
ranges between 0 and 1. A high score on this index indicates that the student body is very similar in socio-demographic characteristics to the overall population, whereas a low equity index score indicates less equity. However, the equity index only takes into account the representation of one social group—made up of those holding a higher education degree—thus neglecting disadvantaged groups with lower levels of education. That is why we have calculated it additionally for students whose fathers have a low level of education.

More specifically, we calculated these indexes for a low level of father’s education (basic education or lower) or a high level of father’s education (higher education). We selected these two extreme categories in order to more clearly account for educational inequalities. For the levels of education in a given country’s general population, we used data from Eurostat for males aged 45–64 with low (ISCED 2011 0–2) and respectively high levels of education (ISCED 2011 5–8) as of 2018 (https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database Data code: edat_lfse_03 [Extracted on: 16.5.2020]).

Figure 8.4 presents the scores for fairness of representation among people from low and high educational backgrounds as of 2018 in

![Index of fairness regarding participation in higher education in five professional fields. (Source: Bulgarian Universities Ranking System, Survey among Students 2018, and Eurostat, Data code: edat_lfse_03 [Extracted on: 16.5.2020])](image)
Bulgarian higher education studying five professional fields. It shows that the group of people with higher education was overrepresented in all five fields studied (i.e. the share of students whose fathers had high levels of education/high social backgrounds within the student population was much higher than the share of men from the corresponding age group [45–64] in the national population from the same [high] level of education/social background). By contrast, the group of people with low levels of education was underrepresented (i.e. the share of students whose fathers had low levels of education/low social background within the student population was much lower than the share of men from the corresponding age group [45–64] in the national population with the same [low] levels of education/social background) in all five fields. Despite that, we observe considerable differences across the professions. Pedagogy could be considered as the fairest field, both in terms of the representation of students from low and high educational backgrounds, whereas medicine, dentistry, and pharmacology could be considered as the least fair professional fields—regarding both people from low and high educational backgrounds.

The Indispensable Value of the Social Justice Perspective for Understanding Adult Education

This chapter draws attention to the crucial importance of the social justice perspective for understanding participation in adult education and its potential to influence individuals and societies. We regard social justice as one of the most important public goods in contemporary societies and argue that the development of a comprehensive social justice perspective towards adult education would benefit from being complemented and mutually enriched by ideas from Rawlsian theory of justice as fairness, the capability approach, and Fraser’s understanding of recognition as a matter of justice.

It conceptualises social justice in adult education and the role of adult education for increasing justice in a given society as complex phenomena which are context and time-specific, depending mainly on the social
inclusiveness and stratification level of the adult education system. We argue that social justice regarding participation in adult education has a multi-dimensional character, and we define the most prominent of these dimensions to be the inclusion and fairness aspects, social justice for whom, social justice where, and social justice to what. These theoretical conceptualisations are accompanied by empirical evidence for two of the dimensions of social justice regarding participation in adult education—‘inclusion and fairness for whom’ and ‘social justice in relation to what’.

This chapter further enriches our understanding of the inclusion and fairness aspects of equity in adult education by measuring them in relation to individuals’ employment status. We investigated inclusion and fairness of participation in non-formal adult education for employed and unemployed people. Our analysis started from the well-documented situation in all countries wherein the majority of participants in non-formal education are employed adults, while unemployed adults are underrepresented (i.e. the proportion of unemployed persons among the entire national population aged 25–64 is higher than the proportion of unemployed people among those participating in non-formal education). We calculated I\textsubscript{incluNFE} and I\textsubscript{fairNFE} in order to understand the trends in participation of employed and unemployed adults in non-formal education over time (in the period 2011–2016) from a social justice perspective. The results show that countries differ in terms of the inclusiveness and fairness of non-formal education for employed and unemployed adults. More concretely, we found that the number of countries in which non-formal education has become more inclusive for employed adults is higher compared to the number of countries in which it has become more inclusive for unemployed adults. This means that the likelihood of employed adults to participate in non-formal education has increased in more countries, while the same likelihood regarding unemployed people has increased in fewer countries. There are very few nations in which non-formal education has achieved better inclusion with regard to unemployed adults over employed adults.

In relation to fairness, we observe a decrease in the overrepresentation of employed adults in most countries, which means that the proportion of employed adults among those participating in non-formal education
there has grown closer to the proportion of employed people within the entire national population aged 25–64. Concerning the fairness aspect of unemployed adults’ representation, our analysis revealed that this has increased in almost half of the countries studied.

It is important to emphasise that the most inclusive countries are not always the fairest, and vice versa. According to our results, increased participation in non-formal education among employed is associated with reaching better representation for this group within this type of education. However, for the unemployed, there is no such relationship. This empirical finding confirms our thesis that inclusion and fairness are two connected yet different aspects of social justice in adult education which may not always go hand in hand. It also draws the attention of policymakers to unemployed adults as a special and very important group for targeted policy measures.

The present chapter also empirically demonstrates the multidimensional character of social justice in adult education by studying the involvement of students from low and high educational backgrounds in different higher education professional fields—with Bulgaria as its case study. By asking the question ‘Access to what?’ we tried to take into account the differences in status and prestige among different higher education institutions and professional fields. Thereby, we showed the existence of inequalities caused by the internal differentiation and stratification of higher education systems. This question seems to be underestimated in discussions on equity, but it becomes very relevant given that the expansion of higher education has been accompanied by its increased differentiation and stratification.

The result of our analysis is that people with higher education were overrepresented in all five professional fields studied, whereas those with low education levels were underrepresented. The latter finding is in line with many other studies suggesting the stable and persistent effect of socioeconomic background on access to higher education (Blossfeld and Shavit 1993; Lucas 2001; Pfeffer 2008; Ilieva-Trichkova and Boyadjieva 2014). Besides this, however, we have found considerable differences across various professional fields. Medicine, dentistry, and pharmacology, among the most prestigious professional fields in Bulgaria, are the least fair. These are the fields in which students from high educational
backgrounds are the most overrepresented; those from low social backgrounds are the most underrepresented in them. Pedagogy is the least prestigious among the five professional fields studied. It is also the fairest field in terms of representation among students from both low and high educational backgrounds. This finding corresponds to Reimer and Pollak’s analysis (2010) which reveals a robust social background effect on choice of field of study, thus providing evidence which corroborates the hypothesis of effectively maintained inequality in higher education.

The chapter has followed some of the directions for further research outlined in a previous study (Boyadjieva and Ilieva-Trichkova 2017, p. 113). More concretely, we have deepened the theoretical reflection on social justice in adult education, investigated social justice in adult education for social groups differentiated on the basis of their professional status, and empirically demonstrated the importance of the ‘access to what’ aspect of social justice in adult education. All these directions are open for new future research. One question of crucial importance remains: which are those factors, at both macro and micro levels, which could explain the observed—and, in some cases, considerably so—differences among countries with regard to different aspects of social justice in adult education. It is also worth continuing the efforts to reveal and apply the heuristic potential of different theoretical approaches to social justice for conceptualising equity in adult education. Special attention needs to be paid to the explanation of the results obtained. In this regard, a thorough analysis of the adult education system in each one of the countries studied is necessary.

The essence of recent trends and studies in higher and adult education can be summarised with Marginson’s (2016, p. 69) words in the following way: although “there is a worldwide tendency to high-participation systems” in higher education and a steady increase in the involvement of adults in learning activities, “[e]quality of opportunity in the full sense is unrealisable, because of the persistence of irreducible differences between families in economic, social and cultural resources”. The recent coronavirus pandemic “has bought pre-existing inequalities into sharper relief” and has highlighted the significance of “social and economic inequalities arising in part from the application of technology” (Waller et al. 2020, pp. 243–244). Thus a specific type of inequality regarding access to all
forms of education—digital inequality—acquires crucial importance. As Boeren et al. (2020, p. 201) suggest “[t]he global pandemic will likely exacerbate and compound learning barriers” for the groups who are least likely to participate in adult learning, such as adults with lower levels of education and lack of or insufficient employment. We think that the authors rightly insist, “[a]dult education should be at the forefront of providing everyone with a fair chance to develop their abilities and to put them to valuable use” (ibid., p. 203). That is why the social justice perspective is indispensable if we want to fully grasp the processes of participation in adult education and its actual potential role for promoting equity.

Highlighting the importance of the social justice perspective towards adult education does not mean undermining other important perspectives. Unterhalter and Carpentier (2010) argue that we are facing a node of problems which may be better seen as a ‘tertralemma’. This ‘tetra-lemma’ pulls higher and adult education in different directions—economic growth, equity, democracy, and sustainability—which are often associated with conflicting agendas. It is important to keep this view in mind. It suggests that, while we are searching for and aiming at social justice (or economic growth or democracy) in and through adult education, we should always try to find the harmony across these different agendas.

Notes

1. This chapter uses data from Eurostat, ‘AES, 2011, 2016’ obtained for the needs of Research Project Proposal 196/2019-LFS-AES-CVTS. The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.
2. For a description of the survey, see Methodological Note.
3. Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
4. This representation is calculated by dividing the proportion of participants in adult education, aged 25 to 64 years, who belong to a certain
social group (in our case—employed or unemployed) by the proportion of people from the same group in the entire national population aged 25 to 64 years. A value of representation above 1 indicates overrepresentation of the given social group among participants in adult education, whereas, a value below 1 shows that this group is underrepresented. A value of 1 means that a given social group is perfectly represented within a given form of adult education in the respective country.

5. This survey was carried out by the Open Society Institute, Sofia, within the project “Maintaining and improving the developed rating system of higher education” (Phase 1), funded by the Operational Programme “Science and Education for Smart Growth”, co-financed by the European Union through the European Structural and Investment Funds. The survey data were provided by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Bulgaria with Decision No. 94-1375/14.05.2020.

6. See https://rsvu.mon.bg/rsvu4/#/.
7. Equivalent to ISCED 1997 1–2.
8. Equivalent to ISCED 1997 5–6.
9. ISCED 2011 0–2 corresponds to primary and lower secondary education (UNESCO 2012).
10. ISCED 2011 5–8 corresponds to short-cycle tertiary education, bachelor’s or equivalent level, master’s, and doctoral degrees or their equivalent levels (UNESCO 2012).

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