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Social Justice and Scottish Education: Political Priorities, Conceptualisations, Challenges and Tensions

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Abstract

Social justice is prominent across Scottish education, underscored by its inclusion as the first professional value of the 2021 General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) Professional Standards. In this paper we question the extent to which conceptual understandings of social justice align with political and professional domains in Scottish education. We explore inherent tensions between the aims for education in Scotland, and the measures-driven context in which it operates. We present an analysis of Official Reports from the Education and Skills Committee (2016 to 2021) to consider what this might tell us about the balance between economic, social and political concerns within social justice Discourse in Scotland and how this relates to the GTCS-stated social justice values for the education profession. We conclude the paper by offering thoughts as to how the profession might further engage with social justice to challenge the significant economic imperatives inherent in Scottish education.

Keywords

Introduction

Even cursory observation would note the centrality of social justice in Scottish education policy, including its prominent position in all standards set by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS, 2021). Despite this, a clear consensus on what social justice *is*, and how it *can best be advanced* through educational policy and practice, remains elusive. Seemingly, such lack of consensus is also international. As Hytten and Bettez note,

> it is often unclear in any practical terms what we mean when we invoke a vision of social justice or how this influences such issues as program development, curricula, practicum opportunities, educational philosophy, social vision, and activist work.
>
> HYTTEN & BETTEZ, 2011, p.8

GTCS offers a definition of social justice which strongly echoes Nancy Fraser's (2005) theory with its principles of redistribution, recognition, and representation. The extent to which this aligns with political Discourse and discourse (after Gee, 2012) on social justice merits some investigation, given the far-reaching influence of central policy making on priorities for improvement within Scottish education establishments.

A further dilemma arises when we consider whether teachers' understanding of social justice does in fact reflect GTCS professional standards, and the challenges inherent in assessing a professional standard consisting of a personal value. What practical steps must all teachers take to know that they are advancing social justice through their practice? What measures might indicate success? Despite its centrality and the unanimity with which it is accepted as a central goal of Scottish education, the practical outworking of social justice as a professional value is hard to pin down.

Here, we study the Discourses (after Gee, 2012) presented in meetings of the Education and Skills Committee which suggest a gap exists between conceptualisations of social justice in the education profession, and the ways in which social justice is approached in the Scottish political domain. This highlights an apparent tension between political drivers requiring accurate measurement of success, and the values-based aspirations of the education profession.

Here we present findings from a content analysis of Education and Skills Committee discussions throughout the term of the fifth Scottish parliament (June 2016 to March 2021). We examine two things: first, the frequency with which a defined range of social justice themes were addressed; and secondly, which aspects of educational practice were most associated with social justice

in this central political forum. In discussing the findings of this analysis, we draw further on Nancy Fraser's theory and suggest that political social justice education Discourse only partially reflects the GTCS definition. Such political Discourse heavily skews discussions towards *economic redistribution* with comparatively little consideration for *social recognition* or *political representation*. We conclude by posing further questions for research which arise from this study, suggesting that further investigation is needed to triangulate the GTCS definition with Scottish teachers' real-life practical understanding of social justice and how this impacts their professional practice.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that how we conceptualise social justice is subject to both historical influences and geographical variations, being the focus of much research and debate internationally. The pursuit of equality of educational outcomes is closely linked to political agendas to improve the economic wealth of countries, for the specific concerns of individual nation states are often identifiable in academic and political Discourse as well as in policy positions. For example, North American research on social justice focuses heavily on race equality, as seen in the work of educational researchers such as Avis Glaze, Lee Anne Bell and Alison Skerrett among others; unsurprisingly perhaps, given the differential education outcomes for people of colour compared with white people in the USA. Across Canada, New Zealand and Australia, social justice for indigenous peoples is a prominent concern for education policy, featuring as a distinct professional standard for teachers in all three countries. This appears as *'truth and reconciliation'* in Canada, with standards informed by the national Truth and Reconciliation Report (Government of Canada, 2015). For example, British Columbia standard 9 requires educators to 'foster a deeper understanding of ways of knowing and being, histories, and cultures of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis' (British Columbia Teachers Council, 2019). In Australia, such moves present as standard 1.4 which requires competence in 'strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students' (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2017); and in New Zealand, as standard 1 which requires that teachers demonstrate 'commitment to tangata whenuatanga and Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership in Aotearoa New Zealand' (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019).

In their special journal edition *Conceptions of Social Justice in Scottish and Swedish education Systems*, Riddell et al. (2017) draw comparisons between approaches to social justice in education in two broadly similar northern European countries. Both share a history of firm commitment to social justice principles, characterised by equality-focused social democratic policies in the post-war era, even though both are still grappling with persistent inequality of attainment outcomes and unequal representation in higher education

linked to social class and/or socio-economic deprivation. The prominence of economic concerns is striking across the papers in the special issue. Riddell and Weedon (2017, p.3) question 'the extent to which education may be used as a means of achieving social justice and supporting citizenship rights at a time when economic inequalities are increasing,' placing redistribution as the central social justice concern. Johansson's (2017, p.64) research notes that 'the choice of upper secondary school programme often follows a pattern related to the student's gender and socio-economic background (Skolverket, 2015), and also to the student's expected labour market destination (Hjelmer, 2012).' Furthermore, the impact of neoliberalism throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries in Western European education systems has been discussed by several prominent educationalists (notably Sahlberg, P. (2016)) who problematise the impact of increasingly data-driven, measurement-focused means of assessing education outcomes, as we shall discuss.

Defining social justice

Definitions of social justice are in fact many and varied. Philosophical complexity surrounds the issue specifically because *social justice* is inextricably linked to the concept of *justice*. It is not our purpose here to engage in debate on justice; however, before approaching the problem of social justice in education, it is useful to understand something of the modern history of the concept and its roots in philosophy, economics, and sociology.

We might start by tracing a line from the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill to John Rawls' Theory of Social Justice (Rawls, 1971) which sought to propose a more 'moral' form of utilitarianism, drawing on Kantian ethics. Rawls is arguably the first to explore the concept of social justice as distinct from justice more generally, with this distinction arising from the focus on social and economic outcomes over the course of a lifetime, as opposed to justice in response to a crime or wrongdoing. Further problematising Rawlsian economic justice, Amartya Sen's capability theory points to the insufficiency and inadequacy of redistributive processes to improving wellbeing unless individual goals and capabilities are also considered (Sen, 1985). Taking a philosophical rather than economic approach to the issue, Charles Taylor (1992) also points to the importance of individual moral frameworks and ideas of self-realisation in his argument for authenticity to bridge the gap between individualism and collectivism.

In their thoroughgoing literature review, Kathy Hytten and Silvia Bettez (2011) identify five primary strands to social justice research: the philosophical/conceptual; the practical; the ethnographic/narrative; the theoretically specific; and

the democratically grounded. We do not have space here to examine each of these in detail; nevertheless, it is useful to observe that social justice can be considered through several lenses depending on the onlooker's stance and how they frame the issue. This is perhaps unsurprising in a field that deals with subjective and contested concepts such as justice and fairness, and with perceptions of what might constitute socially, politically, and economically just outcomes.

Against this background of philosophical and economic debate, sociologist Nancy Fraser proposes three dimensions of social justice: redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser, 2005). While Fraser does not provide the last word on social justice, her theory has been critically accepted and her work is widely deployed as a useful framework to both understand social justice and work to practically advance it. While GTCS does not disclose the source of its published definition, it appears to be very closely aligned with Nancy Fraser's. If we accept 'social rights' as shorthand for recognition, 'political rights' as representation, and 'economic rights' as redistribution, it appears that Fraser's work offered the GTCS a well-timed approach. Indeed, Nancy Fraser explains recognition, representation, and redistribution in these terms:

> Justice requires that people have the position, the status, to be able to participate on an equal basis in any and every important arena of social life; that is, family life, the labour market, civil society and, obviously, in politics and in the political public sphere, but not only in these.
>
> FRASER, 2009, n.p.

Furthermore, Fraser's theory has been applied to other education contexts with some success (see Gilbert et al., 2011; also, Keddie, as cited in Lingard et al., 2014). We will return to Fraser's theory of social justice later to consider its implications for approaches to promoting social justice in Scottish education.

OECD and the Neo-Liberal Political Context in Scotland

As noted by the OECD review of Curriculum for Excellence (2021, p.105), education has become highly politicised in Scotland, and it would be reasonable to speculate that the course of educational policy is heavily influenced by political goals. A striking example would be former first minister Nicola Sturgeon's invitation to judge the success of the SNP administration by its success in closing the poverty-related attainment gap. It can be argued that such intense focus on this measure has led to increased political weaponisation of educational attainment, along with a tendency to view social justice reductively, beginning and

ending with attainment of disadvantaged children and young people, and overly focused on numerical measures and 'audit culture' at the expense of all else.

Scottish Government's policy focus on equity and closing the poverty-related attainment gap directly followed the previous OECD report on Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in 2015:

> A major challenge is how to stay bold and to build on what has already been accomplished in a way that is as persuasive to the public as it is to the profession, and that can achieve greater equity for all pupils sooner than later.
>
> OECD, 2015, p.16

The 2015 report noted that a wide range of policies were in place to increase equity and improve quality, but it also highlighted the necessity that improvement in overall standards and improvement in equity must happen simultaneously to reduce inequality of outcomes between the most and least disadvantaged pupils. Of its twelve recommendations, three foregrounded equity as a focus for improvement:

– Be rigorous about the gaps to be closed and pursue relentlessly "closing the gap" and "raising the bar" simultaneously.
– Ensure a consolidated and evidence-informed strategic approach to equity policies.
– Develop metrics that do justice to the full range of CfE capacities informing a bold understanding of quality and equity. (OECD, 2015, p.12)

Of the three equity-focused 2015 recommendations highlighted above, evidence of the first two is easily identifiable in subsequent Scottish education policies, the National Improvement Framework and Pupil Equity Funding being two prominent examples. With respect to the third however – *Develop metrics that do justice to the full range of CfE capacities informing a bold understanding of quality and equity* – it is challenging to find specific examples of progress to which to point.

This aspect of the 2015 OECD report subsequently reappears in the 2021 review:

> In addition to the National Improvement Framework's measures of literacy and numeracy, other metrics informing progress on the four capacities are necessary, especially around health and well-being, enjoyment of learning and other key competencies.
>
> OECD, 2021, p.119

While the outcomes of the 2022-23 National Debate would suggest that Scottish learners, parents, and educators are united in a desire to move beyond attainment as the sole measure of educational success, a lack of robust ways to evidence wider achievement through 'metrics' is a significant sticking point. Attainment can be readily measured, tracked over time, and sets of data easily compared to generate local and national comparisons. The complexity of measuring such deeply human features as wellbeing and enjoyment, however, presents a significant challenge for a data-focused system operating in a neo-liberal political context. One participant in the 2021 OECD Review describes the situation concisely as *a clash between 19th century assessment and 21st century curriculum'* (OECD, 2021, p.118).

Several educational researchers have already problematised the over-simplification of 'equity' within neo-liberal political contexts and highlighted the tendency for all forms of progress to be reduced to comparative attainment outcomes.[1] As Lingard et al. explain:

> Social justice has been re-articulated as equity through numerical and comparative expressions of these concepts that untether them from carefully elaborated definitions, such as Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2009) work on the redistributive, recognitive and representative dimensions of social justice.
>
> LINGARD ET AL. 2014, p.711

In a similar vein, Keddie and Niesche (2015, p.3) point to an 'audit culture in Western education' where 'equity has become a high-stakes issue'.

It is of course important to recognise the positive impact, and indeed the necessity of, effective processes to monitor and track student performance to inform planning and support reflection on effective practice in learning and teaching.[2] The vital importance of knowing where learners are in their learning and using this to support their next steps is not disputed here. With respect to data measurement, the positive applications of data-focused improvement approaches such as improvement science are significant, provided they are appropriately adapted for the education context. We might reasonably ask however, if the process of gathering data has at times become confused with

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1   See for example, Sahlberg, P. (2016) *The Global Educational Reform Movement and Its Impact on Schooling.* In *The Handbook of Global Education Policy.* Ed. Mundy, K et al. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons

2   See for example Bergeson, T. (2007) *Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools.* Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Olympia, Washington. Online at http://www.k12.wa.us/research/default.aspx

efficiency, and whether we always truly measure progress in service of improvement, or if measurement has perhaps in some cases become an end in itself.

We have, then, powerful forces which not only sit in tension, but in fact risk cancelling each other out: on the one hand, the need for teachers to be data-literate and evidence-focused in their practice as they seek to 'close the gap'; on the other, the risk that such intense focus on measures and outcomes can distract from, or even obscure, the complexity of promoting social justice through education. Add to this tension the pressures of political interest and external agendas, and the likelihood of navigating a path to success seems slim. Paradoxically, systems intended to demonstrate improvement may, where social justice is the aim, undermine their own goal: as Rincón Gallardo (2020, p.468) notes,

> standards, testing and accountability have tremendous appeal for politicians across the political spectrum, for system leaders and multiple stakeholders. Alluring as they are, however, their main drawback lies in their failure to produce their intended results (Mehta, 2013).

Drawing on his research over several decades across multiple Western-tradition education systems, Michael Fullan (2021, p.4) suggests this lack of impact is a result of 'piecemeal' approaches to improving equality of outcomes:

> Galloping inequality (in resources and opportunity) has raced ahead since the end of the 1970s, despite considerable new expenditure directed at equity. Over these forty years the goal of greater equity has made little net difference on the system, save for a few positive outliers.

Again, the importance of political context cannot be ignored here: measures-driven approaches are attractive to politicians under pressure to demonstrate results and impact. However, the prevalence of increasing inequality – despite years of equity-focused measures – suggests that the seeming reliability and solidity of measures and metrics as a sure-fire way to bring about improvement, may be misleading.

While equitable outcomes are clearly a key feature of social justice, this does not imply that *only* the outcomes of education, such as academic performance or school-leaver destinations, are of relevance. Bell (1997, p.3) describes social justice as 'both a goal and a process': it comprises the aim to achieve 'full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs' as well as the range of practices which support progress towards this aim.

The ideas of negotiation, consultation and co-design contained in this 'mutual shaping' should not be overlooked, moreover here we see again close alignment with Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice. The measures in neo-liberal notions of educational improvement are rarely 'mutually shaped', rather they tend to be defined by those who have previously succeeded in the system. This might be evidenced for example by the continued near-exclusive focus on summative attainment measures – Fullan's (2021, p.8) 'academics obsession' – despite mounting evidence that such approaches compound the disadvantage experienced by some learners[3]. Without representation of diverse identities and experiences as part of the social justice 'process', the social justice 'goal' is unlikely to be realised. Fullan summarises the problem succinctly:

> Lack of means and the intersectionality of systems of discrimination have made it virtually impossible for most people to escape their situations of initial disadvantage. This is not a statement of despair but more a conclusion that money will not be enough to achieve a breakthrough.
>
> FULLAN, 2021, p.28

Equity vs social justice in Scottish education

The OECD report of November 2015 report appeared shortly before Scottish elections, after which a new minority SNP government was formed in 2016 and with it, a renewed focus on pupil equity. The central social justice aims of political, economic, and social equality can be clearly identified in the National Improvement Framework (NIF) priorities which followed in January 2016, where we see social justice closely linked to the concept of equity:
– Improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy
– Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people
– Improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing
– Improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people. (Scottish Government, 2016, p.7)

The NIF placed equitable attainment outcomes between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people as one of Scotland's highest priorities in education, thereby linking the notion of equity clearly to the performance of children and young people living with poverty. We could speculate that this

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3 See for example, Stobart, G. & Eggen, T. (2014)

may be the reason why in Scotland the term 'equity' is almost exclusively used to describe improving outcomes for those living with socio-economic deprivation, and rarely to other groups also at risk of experiencing inequity in education, such as minority ethnic groups or children and young people with disabilities. As with the term *social justice*, the word *equity* in international contexts is understood in connection with a wide range of societal challenges such a race inequality, gender discrimination and so on. It is notable, therefore, that in Scottish educational policy, *equity* is generally and primarily understood to refer to policies and practices which create more equitable outcomes for children and young people who are economically disadvantaged. Similarly, while *disadvantage* could of course refer to many things, in the Scottish context the term has become synonymous with *socio-economic disadvantage*, most likely owing to the NIF and to the subsequent introduction of Pupil Equity Funding in February 2017 with its clear emphasis on 'closing the poverty-related attainment gap for disadvantaged children and young people' (Scottish Government 2017).

Returning to Nancy Fraser's theory of recognition, representation, and redistribution – and to the GTCS definition of social justice – there is a link here that warrants some deeper consideration. While the GTCS definition recognises the need to further social, political, *and* economic equality and rights to achieve social justice, there is a case to be made that educational policy of the current administration has focused almost exclusively on economic equality and rights. In brief, it has focused on whether the education system is producing citizens who are equal in terms of their ability to engage in and contribute to the economy. In the National Improvement Hub, a search for the term 'social justice' delivers only one single result, 'Recalibrating Equity and Social Justice in Scottish Education', a paper on post-pandemic recovery focused predominantly on improving outcomes for children and young people experiencing poverty (Education Scotland, 2021). While few would question the value of such a publication, it is notable that guidance on social justice is otherwise missing from the central national improvement resource for practitioners; even more so when we consider that social justice is the first professional value listed within the 2021 GTCS Standards at all levels (registration, career long professional learning, middle leadership, and headship). These standards also state clearly that such values are to be understood as the shared code underpinning teachers' practice in Scotland, with 'a moral imperative that the values are enacted in everyday practice within and beyond the school context' (GTCS, 2021 (Demonstrating the Professional Values), n.p.). It is vital, then, that all Scottish teachers share a clear understanding of the meaning of social justice.

GTCS (2021) defines social justice as 'the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities now and in the future,'

a definition which offers little by way of practical clarification of what would be observed in the classroom of a socially just teacher, or what outcomes are to be observed to assess whether social justice is being achieved in an educational setting. A crucial matter here is that while all might 'deserve', this does not equate to everyone 'experiencing'. Moreover, the GTCS definition of social justice as a 'view' leads to questions as to whether a teacher's ethical-moral views are assessable within a professional framework, and indeed, whether they should be. While most would probably identify teaching as an ethical endeavour, this does not guarantee that educational practice will improve the life chances of pupils. As Gert Biesta notes, 'a baker can be ethical but can still bake awful bread' (Biesta, 2022, p.2). Similarly, a teacher with a strong leaning towards social justice values will not necessarily improve social justice simply by virtue of believing in it. The question therefore remains: what does social justice in education look like, and what must teachers do to achieve it?

From 2016 a new Education and Skills Committee was appointed to drive forward improvements in education with a clear employment- and skills-focused emphasis. In the next section we present the findings of a simple analysis of reports from this committee and explore what this can tell us about how social justice was understood and conceptualised in this forum.

Social Justice in the Education and Skills Committee 2016-21

We analysed reports from the Education and Skills Committee covering the five-year period from 2016 to 2021 (the life of the fifth parliament) with the aim of establishing the following:

1. What specific language and terminology is most frequently used to discuss social justice themes?
2. What areas of educational policy and practice are most associated with social justice?
3. What can this tell us about how social justice is conceptualised in the Scottish political context?

Methodological position

To start, we note tensions inherent in committee report analysis. As with any transcript-type material, subjective positioning of those undertaking the analysis is of warrant. Indeed, while meaning might be said to be 'manifest' through data, this rests upon assumptions made by the researcher. Certainly, there may be instances where such positionality is shared across a group, culture, or society, hence increasing inter-subjective manifest agreement. There

may, though, be times when data presents as 'latent'; meaning is construed and is thus less 'obvious' (Kuckartz, 2019). To understand manifest/latent analysis as distinct, separate, or able to be compartmentalised is unwise; as Kracauer (1952) argued, such distinctions are inherently problematic and in practice, latency is part of the qualitative content analysis process, even when the coding is of data that appears to be manifest in orientation.

Consider, for example, a questionnaire with the following categorical statements, 'very unhappy', 'unhappy', 'neither unhappy nor happy', 'happy', 'very happy'. Such categories seemingly provide readymade interpretive forms from which statements about an individual's 'happiness' can be understood. We can leave aside the philosophical problems with assuming that 'unhappy' and 'happy' are binary opposites; that such an emotional continuum exists upon which individuals can locate themselves; or that each term has internal validity and, hence, is portable across intersubjective common understanding. While these categories might appear to be congruent with manifest interpretation, they are open to latent speculation due to the interpretive qualities individuals and groups may place on each phrase. As Kracauer (1952, p.632) notes, they position the gap 'between' each term as arbitrary and thus assume a uniformity of '…a great variety of treatments whose differences are perhaps highly relevant to the purposes of the analysis.' Further, although granularity might be seemingly foregrounded, and indeed be increased by a proliferation in optional positions (from five to seven for example) or decreased (from five options to four), this does little to assuage the problem at the heart of the analysis.

> Quantification and subsequent statistical analysis are carried out on a highly uncertain basis and relied upon only for this purpose, inevitably leading to inaccurate analyses. These statistical analyses carried out in the mathematical universe, the correlations and precise calculations of probabilities, may then be less accurate, more distorting, and less representative than the qualitative data on which they are based.
>
> KUCKARTZ, 2019, p.6

If the data under analysis has increased latency, qualitative analysis is required, not as a binary opposite to quantification but as a complement. For a notable and recent example of both the effects of granularity and the interweaving of qualitative and quantitative data within a Scottish context, readers are directed to the final report of the *Measuring Quality in Initial Teacher Education* (MQuITE) Project (Kennedy, Carver & Adams, 2023).

Our categorical analysis of the Committee's reports might not have been in the Likert-type form discussed above, but it did seek to highlight terms seem-

ingly manifest in the minutes, albeit with acknowledgment that the deployment of such terms by committee members has latent implications, as had our interpretation. We were mindful that our approach, a content analysis, initially attempted the codification of data at a manifest level with lower levels of interpretation. Here we noted the 'what' within the committee's reports: a process, essentially, of de-contextualisation. Such description then led to the development of themes, or categories, running through the codes, which in turn deepened meaning: such latent interpretation led back to re-contextualisation (Lindgren et al., 2020). While qualitative content analysis has been criticised for losing the *gestalt* of a text through its categorical imperative (Schreier et al., 2019), not least because it can be asked whether its intent is to highlight all possibilities, the most accurate, or the one true meaning, our intent here was none of these: we sought to highlight what might be described as the most conventional *as tied to context*. Our abstraction/re-contextualisation sought to deepen insight into specific, context appropriate patterns, thus allowing us to explore how social justice was deployed as an argumentative frame in this specific forum (the committee). In deriving meaning units (codes then categories) within the confines of human interaction and the ambiguity of language, there was a need to ensure as far as possible, that those aspects deemed significant in terms of meaning did not lose sight of the overall text and its reference. While manifest content can be coded with higher degrees of reliability, with latent content, interpretation is less 'obvious' and resides within personal and group interpretation (Kuckartz, 2019). Hence, inter-rater conversations occurred between authors where manifest and latent meanings were discussed and agreed.

While it might be argued that frequency counting is of dubious value when the abstruse aspects of language necessitate interpretive reading rather than literal classification, such quantification does provide a lens for not only manifest notation, but importantly, when analysed in relation to policy, such numerification can foreground the need for analyses of latency. We assumed that the language used in the reports is agentic, that is, it has the power to bring into being an object through a set of interrelated texts through their production, dissemination, and reception (Preiser et al., 2022) thus contributing to an understanding and the development of social-ecological systems.

Methods

For us to understand the level of priority given to various identified social justice concerns in the political domain and to gain insight into how the overarching concept of social justice was understood by policy makers, we considered the key political drivers in this area and judged it useful to examine the content of Education and Skills Committee Meetings. We carried out a simple

content analysis of the transcripts of these meetings across the duration of the committee's life from 2016-2021, with the aim of identifying the frequency with which social justice-related themes were discussed, and which areas of educational policy were of most significance in connection with social justice.

An initial manual search for the term *social justice* in official Committee Reports using the PDF-reader 'search' function, found that this phrase was used only 11 times in total during 154 meetings of the committee during the fifth parliament. This was puzzling, as the agenda item titles for the committee strongly suggested that a great many discussions were in fact taking place which were deeply connected with social justice matters. It would be hard to imagine a relevant discussion on the subject of 'Attainment and Achievement of School-aged Children Experiencing Poverty' (18 April 2018) for example, in which social justice would not be a prominent feature; yet it does not appear once in the meeting transcript from this date. It was apparent from working closely with the transcripts that while issues pertaining to social justice were discussed frequently, the phrase *social justice* was very rarely used. This could be in itself an indication that the concept of social justice is poorly understood across the system and therefore rarely used in discussions; or it could simply be that other terms are preferred in discussing these issues; or both. We concluded that it was necessary to consider a wider range of vocabulary associated with *social justice* and assess how often this wider range of terms, or codes, was used by committee members, guests, and panel members, and with which areas of education practice such discussions were most frequently associated.

With consideration of Kracauer's manifest and latent meanings, we sought to identify terms which were manifestly related to *social justice*. We used a thesaurus to identify synonyms of *social justice*, which we then used to search for manifest codes (see Table 1). These synonym-based codes also represent key facets of the concept of social justice as outlined in our earlier discussion, such as equality, rights, and fairness.

Starting with the term *social justice* and synonyms thereof, it became clear that this approach was limiting the analysis to socio-economic issues and therefore risked skewing the analysis towards economic/redistributive factors. The GTCS definition of social justice, with its reference to 'equal economic, political, and social rights and opportunities' implies the inclusion of other equalities characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and disability, as does Nancy Fraser's theory. Moreover, as noted above, international educational research and Discourse amply demonstrate that *social justice* is understood to involve a wide range of equality, equity, and rights issues in education. Consequently, we turned to the legislative framework within which social justice

issues are set in Scotland, namely the Equalities Act (2010), including the later addition of Part 1: the Fairer Scotland Duty (2018). While the socioeconomic focus of the Fairer Scotland Duty was already reflected in our initial analysis, the protected characteristics of the Equalities Act (2010) were not, therefore these were added to the search terms.

Following this identification of manifest codes, to identify latency an initial range of associated words and phrases was identified in a test analysis using committee meeting reports from 2016. This was done by analysing tracts of text in discussions containing manifest codes. This led to the expansion of search terms to include defined latent codes. This process can be exemplified by considering the statement below:

> The challenge around attainment and equality and equity issues for all children goes to the very heart of why many of us are here. The point about a person's background not determining their destiny is fundamental.
>
> DANIEL JOHNSON, Committee Member for Edinburgh Southern, Official Committee Report 14 Sep 2016, p.18

Here, alongside the words *equality* and *equity* which are manifest codes for social justice, the word *background* is also relevant in that it represents socioeconomic or other equality-related features of a person's background that might cause disadvantage. *Background* was therefore included for its latent meaning in context: its presence here is indicative of discussion about *social justice*. It should be noted here that care was taken to avoid counting purely idiomatic use of search terms; phrases such as 'that is a fair point' or 'let me give you some background' occurred frequently in the transcripts but were not included in the counts for these codes.

While carrying out the content analysis, where terms emerged that were clearly relevant but had not yet been included in the latent or manifest codes, these were added. This necessitated occasionally returning to previously analysed committee reports in the sequence, to ensure all codes were analysed completely and methodically throughout the full period of the fifth parliament.

Table 1 below shows the terms included in the analysis. We recognise that many of these codes sit towards the *manifest* end of the *manifest-latent* continuum, whereas others tend towards the *latent* end. This should not be viewed as a comprehensive list of all terms that can be associated with *social justice*, but rather as the set of terms used within this study, defined based on wide professional and academic reading.

TABLE 1   List of social justice codes used in analysis of Education and Skills Committee Reports

Manifest codes	Latent codes
Initial search terms based on: – synonyms of *social justice* – protected characteristics under the Equalities Act (2010) – Fairer Scotland Duty (2018)	Search terms added based on close analysis of manifest codes for social justice-related content
(social) justice/(social) injustice	attainment gap
socioeconomic	(socioeconomic) background
fairness	boys/girls
fair/unfair/fairer	fair access
advantaged/disadvantaged	social composition
privilege/privileged/under-privileged	social groups
justice/injustice	social circumstances
equality/inequality	economic circumstances
social equality/inequality/-ies	social mobility
equal/unequal (inc. equalities, inequalities, equally)	social capital
equity/inequity	social responsibility
equitable/inequitable	(social) class
deprivation/deprived	care experience/care leaver(s)
poverty/poverty-related	pupil equity funding/PEF
rights	Scottish index of multiple
race/ethnicity/BME/BAME	deprivation/SIMD
Additional Support Needs/ASN	young carers
Disability/disabled	
gender/male/female	
religion/belief	
LGBT/lesbian/gay/bi/trans/intersex/homosexual	
discrimination/discriminate/discriminatory	
racism	
sexism	
homophobia	
transphobia	
islamophobia	
antisemitism	
ableism	

TABLE 2   Categorisation of codes used in analysis of Education and Skills Committee Reports

Codes arising from synonyms of *social justice*

Equality	Equity	Justice & fairness	Rights	Social privilege & disadvantage
equality/inequality	equity/inequity	social justice/social injustice	rights	social composition
social equality/inequality/-ies	equitable/inequitable	justice/injustice		social groups
equal/unequal (inc. equalities, inequalities, equally)	pupil equity funding/PEF	fairness		social circumstances
		fair/unfair/fairer		economic circumstances/factors
		fair access		(socioeconomic) background
		discrimination/discriminate/discriminatory		social mobility
				social responsibility
				social capital
				(social) class
				advantaged/disadvantaged
				privilege/privileged/under-privileged
				care experience/care leaver(s)

TABLE 2 Categorisation of codes used in analysis of Education and Skills Committee Reports (*cont.*)

Codes arising from the legislative context of the Equalities Act (2010), including the Fairer Scotland Duty (2018)

Poverty	Protected characteristics
poverty/poverty-related	race/ethnicity/BME/BAME
deprivation/deprived	Additional Support Needs/ASN
attainment gap	disability/disabled
SIMD	gender/male/female
Scottish index of multiple deprivation/simd	religion/belief
	LGBT/lesbian/gay/bi/trans/intersex
	homosexual
	racism
	sexism
	homophobia
	transphobia
	islamophobia
	antisemitism
	ableism
	young carers

To analyse the results, we assigned categories to the above codes, based on their method of identification. Table 2 shows the categorisation of each code.

Given the great flexibility and creativity possible in the use of language, many different combinations of words and phrases occurred in the transcripts e.g., 'social circumstances', 'poorer economic groups.' On occasions where such additional terms were counted, care was taken to ensure this did not result either in the counting of extraneous usage of codes arising in conversation between participants (e.g., 'tell me about your own professional background'), or in the double-counting of the same idea (e.g., 'disadvantaged background').

Proper nouns were excluded from the analysis; however, Pupil Equity Funding/PEF was included due to overlap with, and variations in terminology found in discussions about, equity (e.g., equity funding, pupil equity monies, funding provided to promote equity).
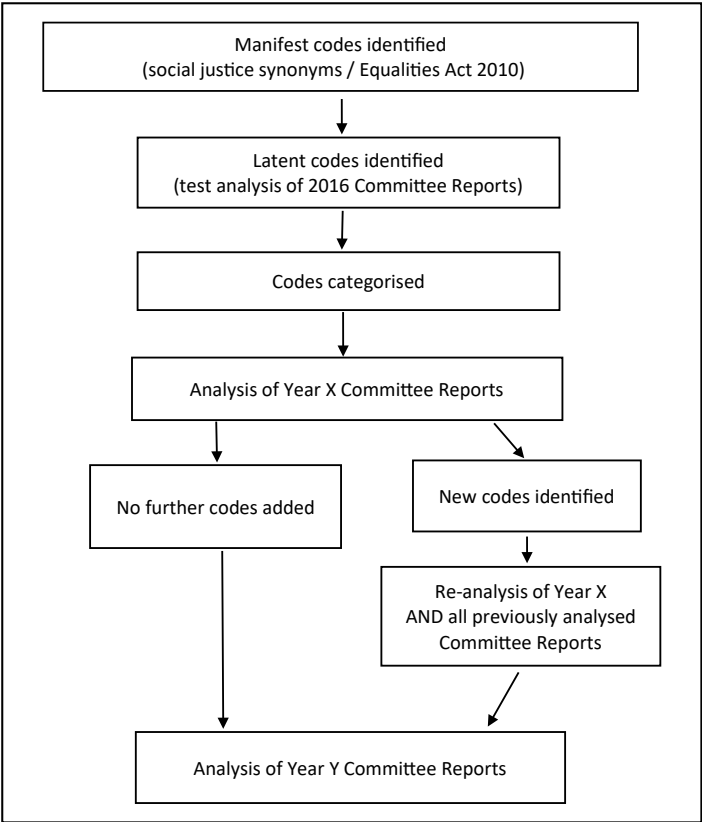

FIGURE 1   Process of code identification, analysis of Committee Reports and systematic re-analysis following addition of new codes

Results

The results of the content analysis are summarised below in Figures 2, 3 and 4. It should be noted that while the initial analysis from 2016 to 2021 was useful in identifying some broad trends and spikes, the number of months in 2016 and 2021 falling within the life of the fifth parliament was significantly fewer than in the full years from 2017-2020. The data must therefore be viewed with this in mind.
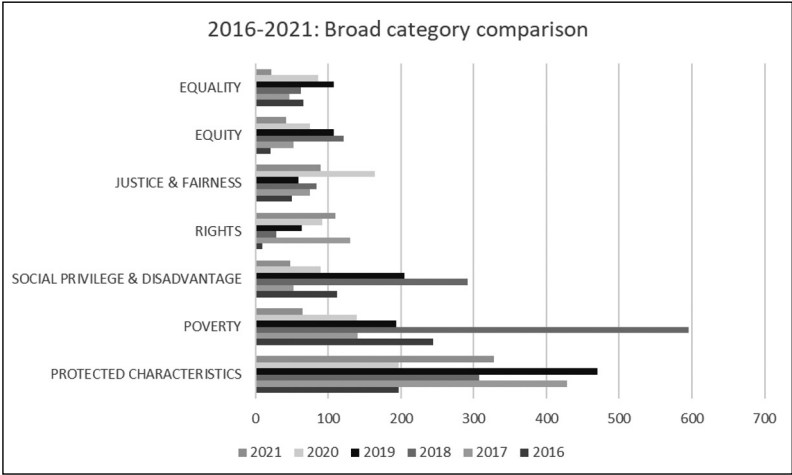

FIGURE 2   The number of occurrences of codes organised by category, during the life of the Education and Skills Committee in each of the years from 2016-2021

It is notable that *poverty, equity* and *social privilege and disadvantage* all saw spikes in 2018, given the Pupil Equity Fund began in 2018. The trend over time in discussion of *social privilege and disadvantage* mirrors very closely the trend in discussion of poverty over time. Discussion of *equality* and *justice and fairness* remained relatively stable over the term of the fifth parliament, notwithstanding a spike in *justice & fairness* codes in 2021 resulting from an inquiry into Redress for Survivors of Abuse. Figure 3 below presents the data in stacked format, allowing for comparison of overall counts for each category from June 2016 to March 2021.
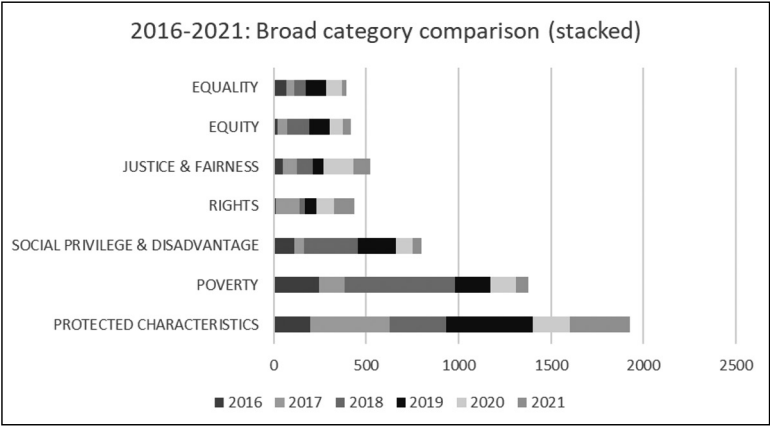
FIGURE 3　The number of occurrences of codes organised by category in stacked format, during the life of the Education and Skills Committee in each of the years from 2016-2021

An important point relates to the above representation of protected characteristics. This initial analysis suggested that these were more frequently discussed than other categories. When we disaggregated the protected characteristics however, a contrasting picture emerged. Figure 4 shows the overall count from 2016-21 of each category alongside each disaggregated protected characteristic.
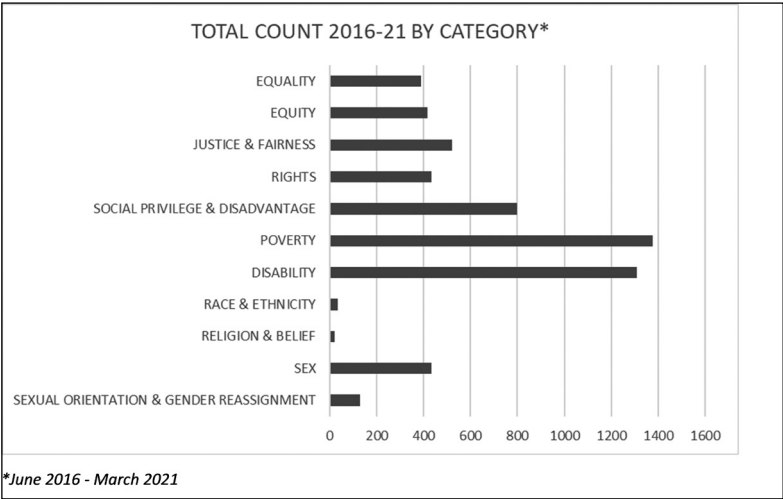

FIGURE 4　The number of total occurrences from June 2016 – March 2021 of codes organised by category, with protected characteristics disaggregated into individual categories

Analysis

The data presented in Figures 2-4 shows several trends and features which warrant further discussion. To analyse the findings of the study we will return to each of our initial questions in turn.

1. *What specific language and terminology is most frequently used to discuss social justice themes?*

Overall, throughout the term of the fifth parliament, discussions about social justice were most strongly associated with codes in the categories: *poverty; social privilege and disadvantage;* and *protected characteristics.* The disaggregated data in Figure 4 reveals that the prominence of the protected characteristics category is largely due to codes for *disability,* the most frequently discussed protected characteristic by a significant margin. This is perhaps unsurprising given the prominence of Additional Support Needs (ASN) in committee meeting agendas.

In stark contrast, *race and ethnicity*, and *religion and belief* were discussed very infrequently in comparison with other protected characteristics and poverty-related factors. The group of terms *race/racism/racist/ethnic/ethnicity/ BME/BAME* appeared only 7 times from 2019-2021. The contrast becomes even starker if we take the view that the *poverty* category and *social privilege and disadvantage* category are both essentially concerned with socioeconomic factors.

Discussion of *sex and gender* increased from 2016-2019 but fell off sharply in 2020; the only terms which increased in frequency from 2019 to 2020 were *justice and fairness,* and *rights.* The prominence of *rights* increased steadily over the course of the parliament, notwithstanding a spike in 2017 connected with the Children and Young People Bill. *Justice and fairness* increased significantly as a focus during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. *What areas of educational policy and practice are most commonly associated with social justice?*

A very wide range of agenda items and discussions were tabled for the Education and Skills Committee from 2016-21. To allow for analysis, these were codified and aligned to a smaller number of overarching themes of discussion which recurred with varying degrees of frequency. This list is shared in the Appendix. Thereafter, filter functions and conditional formatting within Microsoft Excel were used to identify those categories which occurred most frequently. The results can be seen below in Table 3, Analysis 1 (left-hand column). Initially, discussions focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic were coded separately, with acknowledgement of the sector focus within each discussion (e.g., 'COVID/Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)'). This analysis al-

lowed for comparison of the frequency with which the different sectors were discussed in relation to the impact of the pandemic.

In an alternative approach, discussion of the pandemic can be combined with the distinct totals for ASN, ELC, School Education, Further/Higher Education (FE/HE) and Attainment. The results of this alternative approach can be seen in the right-hand column, Analysis 2.

TABLE 3   Total count of social justice codes in Education and Skills Committee Reports June 2016 – March 2021, arranged by agenda item categories

Analysis 1		Analysis 2	
CODE	**SJ Count**	**CODE**	**SJ Count**
ASN	**613**	**FE/HE**	**703**
FE/HE	**587**	**ASN**	**685**
Attainment	**584**	**Attainment**	**627**
Poverty-related attainment gap	471	Poverty-related attainment gap	471
Curriculum & pathways	352	Curriculum & pathways	352
Workforce	329	Workforce	329
Subject choices enquiry	299	Subject choices enquiry	299
STEM inquiry	280	STEM inquiry	280
Child abuse inquiry	179	**ELC**	**198**
Education reform	165	Child abuse inquiry	179
PSHE	164	Education reform	165
Covid/ELC	**137**	PSHE	164
Covid/General	126	**School education**	**149**
CYPCS	123	Covid/General	126
Care experience	116	CYPCS	123
Covid/FE/HE	**116**	Care experience	116
Budget	107	Budget	107
Music tuition in schools inquiry	107	Music tuition in schools inquiry	107
Chn & YP Bill	103	Chn & YP Bill	103
Agenda & priorities	80	Agenda & priorities	80
Governance	78	Governance	78
Covid/School education	**75**	Student finance	45
School education	**74**	Pupil support	43

TABLE 3   Total count of social justice codes in Education and Skills Committee Reports
June 2016 – March 2021, arranged by agenda item categories (*cont.*)

Analysis 1		Analysis 2	
CODE	**SJ Count**	**CODE**	**SJ Count**
Covid/ASN	72	Children's hearings	32
ELC	61	Cabinet secretary questions	18
Student finance	45	Vulnerable groups	6
Covid/Attainment	43	Infrastructure	1
Pupil support	43	Legislation	0
Children's hearings	32		
Cabinet secretary questions	18		
Vulnerable groups	6		
Infrastructure	1		
Legislation	0		

In both analyses, we see that *ASN*, *FE/HE* and *Attainment* are the most fre-
quently discussed social justice concerns. The most significant differences be-
tween the two approaches to categorisation are in: the ranking of ASN and FE/
HE, with FE/HE emerging as an even more prominent social justice concern in
discussions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and in the position
of ELC, where the frequency of social justice discussions focused on this sector
more than tripled due to discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These top three are closely followed by *Poverty-related Attainment Gap*. The
frequency of agenda items with this last title and its distinct focus on econom-
ic disadvantage, warranted that it be counted separately; however, it should be
noted that if combined with other discussions about Attainment more widely,
this would result in Attainment appearing as the most frequent social justice
concern by a very significant margin.

Discussion

3. *What can this tell us about how social justice is conceptualised in the Scottish
    political context?*
Returning to our starting point of the GTCS definition of social justice, which
comprises 'economic, political and social rights', it can be seen that all but one
of the top five social justice concerns above align almost exclusively with eco-

nomic rights: the extent to which all pupils are able attain their full potential and access further and higher education pathways. The positioning of three further items related to pathways within the top eight social justice concerns (Curriculum & Pathways, Subject Choices Inquiry, STEM Inquiry) gives further prominence to the concern for socially just access to careers and pathways.

The frequency with which children with Additional Support Needs (ASN) are discussed stands out as an exception here. This is the only protected characteristic under the Equalities Act (2010) which appears with significant frequency. Closer examination beyond the scope of this study would be required to identify whether the committee's focus on children with ASN is weighted towards their economic, political, or social rights. Alongside the wellbeing and attainment of children with additional support needs, it was seen that scarcity of staff resources, concern for the outcomes of children who do not have additional support needs, and support for teachers of children with additional support needs were prominent themes in the committee's discussions of ASN, although no more detailed analysis of these discussions was undertaken. What can be noted with confidence, is that the ability of people with disabilities to access education and the levels and types of support available to them, has been a constant – if fluctuating – concern, with a significant increase in 2021 following Angela Morgan's independent review of support for learning (Scottish Government, 2020). It would be apposite to investigate whether attainment – the overall most dominant social justice concern – is also the most dominant concern for pupils with ASN.

A significant point of discussion relates to what is absent in this analysis rather than what is present. With reference to Figure 4, we are particularly struck by the very low frequency of discussion of race equality and ethnicity over the life of the fifth parliament. It is hard to understand why, during the years from 2019-2021 when the Black Lives Matters movement gathered pace and visibility both internationally and in Scotland, so little time was given to discussion of race equality. It must of course be acknowledged that the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the committee's focus, yet here too it is surprising, given what was known from an early stage of the pandemic about its disproportionate impact on BAME people, that race and ethnicity did not increase in frequency of discussion over the pandemic period. This contrasts with the increasing frequency of other justice- and fairness-focused discussions over this period.

As discussed earlier, Fraser's theory suggests that to achieve justice of redistribution, there is a need for representation and recognition also to be equitable. Regarding other equality groups and educational policy, it is worth noting that ethnicity, disability, and family status are listed as Poverty Risk Factors within the national Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, but ethnicity in particular is

largely absent from any other plans to improve attainment. Scottish Government established a working group (Race Equality and Anti-Racism in Education Programme) in 2021 to begin to identify what support is required to tackle racism in the education system, but progress is slow and at the time of writing, comprehensive anti-racist policy guidance for education establishments has yet to emerge. In the meantime, efforts to improve outcomes for groups other than the economically disadvantaged are defined in relation to their intersection with poverty – that is, through economic, redistributive measures such as PEF and the Scottish Attainment Challenge. While few would argue with the importance of this intersectional view of poverty, it is important to note that this approach starts by prioritising *redistribution* and pays minimal attention to the dimensions of *recognition* and *representation*. This suggests a significant gap between the policy focus of Scottish Government in working to achieve social justice, and the conceptualisation of the issue in education professional spheres.

The small-scale study shared here suggests that political Discourse at the highest level is largely focused on redistribution and lacks sufficient meaningful engagement with the underlying attitudes to cultural and political equality, which are an essential component of issues such as racism and gender inequality. As Fraser (1995, p.72) explains,

> Cultural norms that are unfairly biased against some are institutionalized in the state and the economy; meanwhile, economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres and in everyday life. The result is often a vicious circle of cultural and economic subordination.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, which has analysed 154 committee meetings falling within a relatively short period and has applied an approach based on categorisation, which can never fully capture the subtleties or nuances of individual discussions. Nevertheless, it can be seen that the terms and categories were adopted methodically and based on a thorough exploration of the concept of *social justice*; therefore, the trends identified here warrant some discussion as to their significance, and raise valid questions that suggest the need for further research.

Conclusion

To draw the discussion to a close, it is useful to refer once again to Nancy Fraser's own discussion of the links and tensions at play between different dimensions of

social justice. To counter the potential for polarised positions which pit cultural recognition and economic redistribution in competition, Fraser argued that a more encompassing view which takes account of the relationship between these two dimensions, and their relationship with the third dimension of representation or participation, is required. While poverty is primarily concerned with economic inequality and therefore requires primarily economic solutions, other forms of inequality – such as, for example, racism and gender inequality – involve inequality of cultural recognition intertwined with economic inequality and limitations in political participation; being multi-dimensional in this way, they also require multi-dimensional solutions. Furthermore Fraser argues that many attempts at redistribution are purely *affirmational* – that is, focused on 'correcting inequitable outcomes... without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them' – while the advancement of social justice requires remedies that are also *transformational* – that is, focused on 'correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework' (Fraser, 1995, p.82).

As we continue to develop a more nuanced understanding of intersectional inequality, our attempts at remedies must take account of the recognitive, representative *and* redistributive components of various forms of social inequality. Solutions which address only one form are likely to fail as they overlook the multi-dimensional nature of social justice. In the case of the lack of discussion of race equality in the fifth parliament for example, could it be, as argued by Sleeter (2017) that the whiteness of our elected representatives makes a deep understanding of racial identities and the social inequalities faced by minority ethnic groups less likely to be manifest in such forums, and therefore less likely to influence policy development? There is little or no redistribution currently associated with education policy on ethnicity and race in Scotland, yet we know that proportionately, minority ethnic groups are poorly represented, poorly recognised and achieve poorer attainment and employment outcomes[4].

Another implication of Fraser's theory in the current Scottish education context must surely be a need for deeper partnership between agencies and sectors towards the goal of reducing educational inequality. If educational outcomes are influenced by overlapping political, economic, and cultural factors, we must surely need to involve all these domains in the process of creating socially just education processes. Indeed, OECD has given specific advice to this effect:

> ... efforts to reduce the attainment gap will not be possible solely through schooling and CfE in particular, as other socio-economic factors influ-

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4 See for example Scottish Government (2021) *Teaching in a Diverse Scotland: 3 years on*; also Arshad, R. (2016) *Experiences of Minority Ethnic Young People in Scotland: Issues for Education.*

ence learner outcomes. It will require broader coalitions with welfare, housing and health policy, for example.

<div align="right">OECD, 2021, p.118</div>

We have argued in this paper that the policy focus of Scottish Government's work to improve social justice is disproportionately focused on redistribution and economic rights, to the neglect of social and political rights – Nancy Fraser's recognition and representation. It has been beyond the scope of this study to investigate reasons for this, but we will close by suggesting some possible lines of future enquiry.

The content analysis presented here suggests that the Education and Skills Committee from 2016-21 was focused on economic rights and productivity outputs as their primary social justice concern. Whether the reason for this is that policy makers' understanding of social justice is limited to socioeconomic factors, or whether this prominence has simply resulted from the kinds of political agendas and pressures outlined earlier in this paper, is unclear and warrants further investigation. However, what can be said with confidence is that the handling of social justice in this forum did not fully represent either the concern for 'political, economic, and social rights' of GTCS, nor the 'redistribution, recognition and representation' of Nancy Fraser's social justice theory. In this respect we must conclude that a gap between political and educational conceptions of social justice in Scotland is apparent.

We have, however, relied here on the GTCS definition of social justice and taken this as representative of educators more generally, when in fact this definition may or may not accurately reflect teachers' understanding of the concept at all. Cochran-Smith et al. (2000) have identified significant variation in definitions of social justice provided by initial teacher educators, and it would not be surprising to find similar variation in the understanding of teachers. Further research is needed to explore how Scottish practitioners understand the terms and definitions set out in the 2021 standards, and indeed how these highly values-based standards can be successfully implemented and reliably assessed.

The impact of decades of measures-driven attempts to reduce social inequality is at best limited, and in the views of some prominent educationalists such as Michael Fullan, may be ineffectual or even counterproductive (Fullan, 2021). The influence of neo-liberal politics on education systems – Pasi Sahlberg's 'Global Education Reform Movement' (Sahlberg, 2016) – necessitates a focus on outcomes and measures to demonstrate progress in all areas of practice; but when our educational efforts become limited to that which can be economically measured – that is, the purely *redistributive* – we run the risk that our ability to influence positive change may also become limited to

those issues which are purely economic in nature. The intersectional nature of equality and social justice issues requires a multi-dimensional approach which recognises the need to attend to *recognition* and *representation* alongside *redistribution* and which seeks to implement *transformational* rather than *affirmational* remedies. As a first step towards this, a greater awareness in the Scottish education system that social justice is a complex concept requiring deeper exploration will be required, as well as effective support for practitioners to align their practice with social justice in a meaningful way.

Moving forward, it will be interesting to see if, and how, the Scottish system can reconcile the need for national measures and indicators of progress, with some of the challenges of recognition and representation it currently faces. This conflict sits at the heart of the live debate around Curriculum for Excellence, including Professor Louise Hayward's proposals to Scottish Government (2023) on how we can evidence the full range of learners' skills and progress in ways that go beyond the *successful learners* currently assessed by traditional exam systems, to also demonstrate adequately young people's capacity to be *confident individuals, effective contributors,* and *responsible citizens*. It is doubtful that existing approaches to 'metrics' can resolve this fundamental conflict. Further research and debate are required to identify how we might develop ways to capture and demonstrate the value of those functions of education which stretch far beyond the economic, and those aspects of social justice which are so much more than redistributive.

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Appendix

List of categories assigned to Education and Skills Committee agenda items, June 2016 – March 2021:

Agenda & priorities	CYPCS
ASN	Education reform
Attainment	ELC
Attainment SNSA inquiry	FE/HE
Budget	Governance
Cabinet secretary questions	Infrastructure
Care experience	Legislation
Child abuse inquiry	Music tuition in schools inquiry
Children's hearings	Poverty-related attainment
Chn & YP Bill	PSHE
COVID & ASN	Pupil support
COVID/attainment	School education
COVID/ELC	STEM inquiry
COVID/FE/HE	Student finance
COVID/general	Subject choices enquiry
COVID/schools	Vulnerable groups
Curriculum & pathways	Workforce