

**Title: Comparing Marxist approach and Hegemony theory to understand issue:  
Overcapacity in Secondary Schools in the UK**

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## **1. Introduction**

Contemporary educational issues have largely concerned the availability of resources, namely financial and human resources. The educational needs of the population are met by training young people so that they can undertake their societal responsibilities and duties in adulthood. The idea of social justice is that societal needs form the main guiding principle behind education: everyone receiving state education should develop the skills and attitudes that can enable them to function efficiently in the system that is in place. The equity of education concerns the quality and overall standards of education, which determine the overall standards of society itself. The main aim of this essay is to examine the issue of classroom overcrowding in secondary schools in the United Kingdom in the context of social justice and equity.

## **2. Class size – a contemporary educational issue**

Excessive class sizes are a problem which has been persisting in many state secondary schools throughout the country for many years. According to a recent report by Revesz (2017), “40% of all the secondary schools in the United Kingdom are running at full capacity or overcrowded”. “This has caused immense problems for the country as there is a growing fear among the population as well as the legislators that the very fabric of the social justice would be rendered defeated if it persists (Jayman et al., 2019).” A high student-to-teacher ratio can be detrimental to the quality of education. Allowing for excessive class sizes has “compromised the sanctity of the educational institutions” and it reflects a lack of appreciation of the “significance of education to the society at large”. This problem can be attributed to the following factors:

**Immigration:** According to Revesz (2017), the Local Government Association has warned that, due to increasing immigration into the United Kingdom, by the year 2022, 125,000 school-age

children across the country might not be placed in a school at all. For example, in the East Midlands, Rutland County Council recently reported 86% overcapacity in their secondary schools. The council explained that this is due to the soaring costs of renting and buying property in London, which has resulted in a substantial population migrating to such smaller cities throughout southeast England within community distance of the capital city.

**Overpopulation:**“The need for schools in the country has been rising steadily for the last 16 years, indicating that the schools have great pressure in their sizable student intake capacity(Coughlan, 2016).” It has been forecast that the number of pupils in secondary schools will rise to 3.04 million by 2020 and to 3.33 million in the following five years (not taking into account sixth form pupils) (Coughlan, 2016). This means that an intake capacity of more than 570,000 students has to be created; meanwhile, the education authority for England has continued to reducing per-student spending in recent years (*ibid*).

**Staff Shortage (teachers):** An issue that is compounding the problem of classroom overcrowding in secondary schools throughout the United Kingdom is an insufficient number of properly trained and skilled teachers. Weakening retention of existing teachers in secondary schools is behind this third contributing factor as many secondary school teachers are retiring, opting to work flexible hours, or quitting the profession altogether. According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2016), more than 40% of the teachers who have completed the required teacher training courses leave the teaching profession within five years: “This accounts for more than 14,000 teachers not being retained in five years(Allen et al., 2020).”

The combined effects of reduced state funding, worsening teacher retention rate, immigration and overpopulation, among other factors, have resulted in surge in the average classroom size in

secondary schools across the country. This presents a problem for the students in that their choices in education are being restricted as there are fewer teachers and the classroom environment becomes less conducive to their academic progress. Classroom overcrowding as well as a growing shortage of qualified teachers impact negatively on the quality of education and the development of the student, which in turn will affect the quality of society. The impact of students being made to sit in overcrowding classrooms will be felt across the wider society in the years to come.

### **3. Marxist approach**

One of the main strengths of the theory of political economy by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is that it is idealistic (Anyon, 2011). The doctrine of Marxism works to expose social injustice, and also argues fervently that every human being in society has equal rights and thus should be treated equally (Cole, 2017). Therefore, the Marxist perspective on education is that equality should be driven across the education system as this will help society continue the social revolution towards equality (Rasinski, Hill and Skordoulis, 2017). In the context of the quality of education in the United Kingdom, the following positive and negative notions of Marxist theory can be identified:

First of all, in view of the tenets of Marxist theory, there is much evidence which suggests that the heterogeneous education system in the United Kingdom, comprising both privately and publicly funded school structures and curricula, reproduces class inequality. The state is struggling to provide basic infrastructure to many of its publicly funded school students; by contrast, many private schools, whose pupils consist mostly of children from the upper and upper-middle classes, are better organised and funded (Hill, 2017). In view of this, the Marxist

perspective focuses on mitigating the prevalence of and influences behind social class inequality, and opposes the legitimisation of the class inequality being facilitated by the relevant governing bodies. Furthermore, the Marxist ethos claims that the education system, in general, should not focus on capitalists' needs by simply training students for jobs; rather, it should focus on the acquisition of knowledge in order to educate tomorrow's citizens (Sarup, 2017). According to this approach, politicians responsible for the educational governing bodies influence the system as their views and values influence the contents of study materials (Giroux, 2019). This can be harmful to the education system as the authorities omit certain opinions and dictate views favourable to themselves among the students. The Marxist approach is to check such interferences from the top in order to facilitate an equal and fair education system (Rikowski, 2018). The Marxist approach towards administering a state education system upholds equal opportunity among the students in order to ensure that superior quality of knowledge and education is being facilitated to the students.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that the Marxist perspective on education is deterministic in that it is critical of a Capitalism-guided education system, but does not consider the positive aspects of such a system. The Marxist perspective might also be irrelevant when it comes to the matter of students gaining qualifications, as the perspective focuses merely on promoting equality in terms of schooling and school facilities; it assumes that qualifications achieved in private or public schools are equal, that there is no differentiation. Furthermore, this approach also states that every pupil or student should be provided with the same and equal infrastructure, but does not consider the intelligence of each pupil/student, and differences among education recipients in terms of intelligence (O'Day and Smith, 2019). Some students, being more intelligent, achieve better progress earlier on in their education, and many have

argued that ‘gifted’ pupils are entitled to enhanced learning environments in order to enable them to flourish intellectually and realize their prospects of securing better-paid, more professional occupations(Doyle, 2018). However, Marxist theory does not consider this fact, and generally suggests that equality among the learners and within the education system must be maintained.

#### **4. Hegemony Theory**

The Hegemony approach developed by Antonio Gramsci in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century “intends to permeate values, morality and beliefs throughout the entire society(Jones, 2006).”The ideology of Hegemony develops on the traditional Marxist approach by introducing an understanding of the subtle yet pervasive form of control which is used to perpetuate repressive structures. Carnoy (2017) states that “...the power of the society does not rely on coercion, but it depends on the manipulation of the consensual agreement of the rulers and the ruled. Therefore, according to this approach, the education system and the school form an essential component of the society, and thus existing society requires a radical reform of the education system and schooling.” Furthermore, this perspective towards education states that education should not be restricted to any privileged class in society, but that the masses should have the opportunity to access education; as a result, society can be reformed(Doyle, 2018). Differences facilitated through the existing, Capitalist education system adversely affect the society as it drives disparity across society; thus, education should every individual’s basic right. Furthermore, Gramsci believed that equal access to education helps to eliminate social unrest as it not only educates the entire society, but also diminishes the notion of class privilege as well(Lynch and Crean, 2018).The modern education system has largely emerged from the hegemony perspective of Gramsci,

which in turn lays emphasis on cultural diversity in the society, and equal treatment of the pupils regardless of their backgrounds.

According to Zaidi, *et al.* (2016), one drawback of the Hegemony theory on facilitation of the education system is that it does not address misunderstanding of remarks owing to cultural differences. For example, remarks using the colloquial terms may be perceived on the wrong context. Henao (2017) has also stated that the cultural differences among the various communities would manifest as differences in language as well. However, in this respect the British education systems have been relatively successful as state schools throughout the United Kingdom have been fostering multi-cultural exchanges for many years. One benefit of Gramsci's Hegemony perspective is that it promotes the incorporation of self and social awareness, as well as intellectual development.

However, application of Hegemony theory requires a process, rather than a structure or system. Therefore, the biggest drawback of this perspective is that it cannot be incorporated easily into any of the British education systems. Incorporation of this ideology into the education system requires careful analysis of the existing education system in place; progress based on such an analysis should be made in order to facilitate realisation of this perspective. Ideally, the goal is to deliver an education system that is equally accessible to all, irrespective of class, race, culture or other differences. However, according to Pagano (2017), "Thus, even though Gramsci's hegemony approach towards the education system is based on the Marxist perspective, the facilitation is a complex and time-taking process designed to revolutionise an education system." Furthermore, the Hegemony theory is not a methodology that can address every aspect of the purpose of education. The processes of reducing every political influence and cultural difference



are not always effective, and careful analysis of the existing education system is needed in order to understand the prevalence of inequality and to develop informed strategies.

## **5. Social Justice and Equity Principles**

The primary idea of social justice in education is to promote equity and uniformity in the population; it aims to develop a focused approach that benefits the society at large. The principle of social justice is about ensuring the basic right to education for every child in the country, an education that shapes and builds their knowledge, and prepares them for service to society. Both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued that in a Capitalist system the idea of society is to develop pupils in such a way that their obligations to society are nurtured through the learning process (Dale, 2017). They considered the management and control of the pace of changes in the society through the education system under the guidance of political and capitalist principles. According to Williams (2020), Hegemony affects people's attitudes, morality, values and beliefs, which in turn permeate through all tiers of society and support the *status quo* in the power relations in the society, which in turn dictate the extent of social justice and equity given to the people. The idea of Hegemony is not dominated by force, but is a form and process of power that provides stability and basis on a wide range of consent and acquiescence in the society. There are other principles of social justice and equity in education, such as Bourdieu's idea of social justice that has been largely influenced by Marxism, including social capital, economic capital and cultural capital. Bourdieu stated that they are interrelated, and need to be considered in a combined and networked means of engagement so that lower socioeconomic groups do not end up being disadvantaged by more privileged groups. In summary, Gramsci's Hegemony theory is relevant

to education in that it considers the relationships among social groups with different levels of ownership of capital.

## **6. Analysis**

In this essay, the Marxist view of capitalism and Gramsci's idea of Hegemony and their relevance to state education are considered. "The basic idea for education is to create a uniform society where the need for education is fulfilled by society and the ruling party." (Anyonet *al.*, 2009) However, according to Marx and Engels, the weaponisation of education as a means of controlling the direction of the exposure and shaping of the minds of the people of the society is effectively done with the help of education as a tool (Macleod and Tappolet, 2019). This pervades social justice and helps in the creation of a motivated idea for the consumption of knowledge as a commodity. The equity of the education and learning of the people of the country has been raised to the standard of basic rights. This creates a problem for the majority of the population of the society in favour of a common approach for their education. The common approach of education by and large can be defined as the benefits accrued to the society and the need for the inclusions of the principles of the society to perform various function. Hoevel (2019) has also stated that the upholding the right of education is vested through the social interests of roles and functions to be fulfilled. Thus, commodifying education would be detrimental to the social idea for improvement.

The overcrowding of classrooms in secondary schools throughout the United Kingdom can be ascribed to a number of influences within society. It could also be attributed to the capitalist idea that an education system exists to foster a new generation of people in such a way that they will play their part in society. Such a role is defined by society, and the basic structure and systems in

place have not put into context the need for specialised study to corroborate the networks of the social system(Sailor, 2017).The specialized study is the need of assistance and care physical or emotional to fulfil the educational needs of the child. The networks are the social systems that are in place to ensure educational rights may be implemented.Social justice has tipped the balance in favour of uniformity, but aligning the equity of the education and its quality with the standard and capability of the students has not been considered in curriculum design(Santone, 2018).Advocates of the Marxist idea have also argued that an individual's desire to become a member of affluent social circles is an integral part of human nature. In view of this, they claim that an education system should be guided by the desire among the masses for greater personal comfort and material wealth, rather than being dictated by a privileged few for the benefit of the capitalist system (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2016). The perception of uniformity of society can have a detrimental effect on educational institutions as they exist to cater to the local population and to deliver a high-quality dissemination of knowledge to local pupils. However, this principle has become even harder to uphold given the recent changes in the housing market in the city of London, which has forced out a growing number of people into nearby cities, thus putting pressure on their state schools. Thus, the social justice that advocates for equality and uniformity of education for all citizens and which also upholds the right of all citizens to be upwardly mobile has contributed to this imbalance in terms of the capacity of the schools in surrounding regions outside London. The overcrowding of schools across the United Kingdom also reflects the creation of a false consciousness, one that is supportive of the ideologies of the ruling party. Britain's post-Thatcherite free-market capitalism also legitimatises inequality and oppression among the people throughout the country, and also explains the reduced funding and resourcing of state education in the last few decades. This too has contributed to the rise in overcrowding of

school classrooms. It has been known for many years that there is an inverse relationship between overcrowding of classes and availability of places for pupils (Santone, 2018).

On the other hand, Gramsci in his theory of Hegemony progressively put forward the idea of a process-based social system that is productive for the networked people of the country, one that leverages these networks for their benefits. He argued that schools are not neutral, that they have the responsibility of cementing and reproducing the incumbent hegemony that is directly tied with the interests of the powerful classes of the society. This has led to a gap among the government-funded schools, due to neglect by the society at large owing to the clash of ideologies concerning society and their needs. The existing hegemony subverts the interests of the people as those in power are less concerned with those who are in greater need of education (Mayo, 2017).

## **7. Evidence**

According to Dowling and Brown (2010), research is about gaining adequate knowledge such that one is able to develop rational thinking about the topic in question. **According to a recent report by Busby (2018), the secondary schools in the UK are facing problems with the boom in the number of pupils such that they could be running out of space soon. As per the report, the number of pupils is estimated to be rising to 600,000 over the next few years. As reported by Revesz (2017), almost 53% of the secondary schools in the country are struggling to cope up with such an increase in the number of year seven pupils. The report also estimated that nearly 125,000 children could be opted out on space in schools in the country in 2022. The main reason behind this situation as argued by a head teacher at Whissendine CE Primary School, is that as most of the schools are joining Multi-Academy Trusts for financial stability and educational**

support, more and more super schools are getting over-looked in this situation (Revesz, 2017). However, another report as presented by Silverman (2013) revealed that increase in the number of immigration has been the main reason of overcrowding crisis in the secondary schools in the country. Thus, the secondary schools are struggling to accommodate such a high number of pupils as they struggle to face chronic overcrowding.

According to Coughlan (2016), there was a need for an extra 750,000 places in secondary schools in the country, and that meeting this need would require over £7 billion in investment in infrastructure improvements. Since there is less funding, the number of schools in the country has reduced in proportion to the rise in the number of pupils in the country. This has led to overcrowding as the state education system struggles to cater to the rising number of pupils with the existing number of schools in the country. The notion of unrestricted immigration also points to the socialist idea of better education; however, increased housing costs in cities have forced a growing number of the working population to nearby satellite cities, thus placing pressure on local state-run schools. Hence, I believe that it would suffice to say that the issue of overcrowding in the secondary schools in the country can only be explained with the help of several factors which is again explained through Marxism and Hegemony theories.

It is also necessary to consult secondary sources in order to explore more fully the reasons for overcrowding in secondary schools. A decade ago, Tim Ross (2010) of *The Telegraph* reported that “more than 100,000 pupils have been crammed into overcrowded state schools”. At that time the Department for Education (*cited in* The BBC, 2010) reported that, out of the 3,444 primary schools in England, 20.3% of them were overcrowded and were taking in more students than they were supposed to. The department also reported that 29.3% of secondary schools in England

were overcrowded, an increase from 28.8% in 2009 (*cited in* Ross, 2020). More notably, 760,000 places in schools are still vacant in other parts of the UK(*cited in* Ross, 2020).

“The issues of overcrowding are concentrated mainly in and around the major cities like London...” (Ross, 2020). The report (by the Department for Education) also suggested that an extra 500,000 places would be required over the next five years, which would require funding of £15 billion (*ibid*). According to Coughlan (2016), in around two-thirds of all schools in England the average class size had risen during the preceding two years. Coughlan also reported that 91% of the schools were facing budgetary issues due to cuts in funding, which were also contributing to the problem of overcrowding in secondary schools (*ibid*): “This has impacted and strained the restrictions of the budgetary requirements for the need for more schools in the country.”

## **8. Discussion**

The combined data from the primary research (survey) and secondary sources point to a critical need for the education authority in England to resolve overcrowding in secondary schools.

It is evident that the overcrowding in schools in southeast England can be ascribed mainly to rising housing costs in large cities, especially London. In order to uphold the maxim of equal access to high-quality education for children of all backgrounds, the authorities need to change the way in which funds are distributed among schools in regions throughout the country, and also need to invest more in school building and teacher training. While the capitalist might not support this idea, the Marxist will point to the direct relationship between provision of education and the quality of society, and would argue for improved educational services for the country and its pupils.

~~Both the Marxist and Hegemony theories have their applications in the equal learning opportunity among the pupils regardless of their social class, this discussion has also identified some of the adversity of those approaches as well. Although the Marxist approach towards the education system demonstrates a well established and valid argument, the against everything approach of this ideology makes it a flimsy perspective which illustrates the society as unfair and also ignores the fact which disputes with this theory. On the other hand, Gramsci's hegemony theory has established itself on the Marxist theory but has managed to introduce the missing understanding of the Marxist theory in a subtle yet pervasive form.~~

Both the Marxism and Hegemony theories offer useful pointers, which can guide governments and their education departments in their efforts to ensure that all children might enjoy equal access to high-quality education. However, these theories also concern the breaking down of class barriers and increasing upward mobility, and it is upward mobility that has driven the inflation in property prices in large cities such as London, leading to the unintended consequences of workers being forced into relocating to nearby satellite cities, which has led to increased overcrowding in schools, which in turn is detrimental to the accessibility and quality of education. In general, across Western Europe (including the United Kingdom), the Hegemony theory seems to hold more applicability. As Mayo (2017) argued, “The process of moral as well as the ethical formation of the society can only be achieved through formal education and thus the implementation of the hegemony ideology will benefit the multicultural society of the UK and help facilitate equal opportunity for education.”

## 9. Conclusion

In this essay, the Marxist and hegemony perspectives on the education system have been critically analysed. Gramsci's hegemony perspective is generally considered more applicable to British society and the British education systems.

It may be concluded that overcrowding is a fundamental issue which pupils throughout the country are now facing, and that merely building more schools will not suffice. There is also the need for more suitably qualified teachers, as well as the need to improve teacher retention. While both 19<sup>th</sup> Century theories might be relevant to this issue of overcrowding as the problem will affect the fundamental fabric of society, it is also important to bear in mind that maintaining social justice and equity requires the prevention of hegemonic power structures. It is the moral responsibility of the society and the government of the UK to provide a basic quality of education to all pupils across the country. Hence, social justice and equity in the society can be maintained through the best practices of education and prevalence of the socialist idea rather than a capitalist hegemony.



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