

Equity, education and hope

Elaine Unterhalter, University College London, Institute of Education

Thank you for giving me the honour of inviting me to deliver this final lecture of the conference, named to commemorate the life and work of Joseph Lauwerys in comparative education. The theme of my lecture concerns the ways in which equity in education is linked with hope. This association comes from one of the earliest appearances of the word equity in English. In Wycliff's translation of the Bible into English in 1382 he coined the word equity in a passage from the Book of Malachai. The verses describe the prophet ferociously condemning the priests of Israel for neglecting their covenant with God. But it also holds out the notion that the prophet will express 'the law of truth' walk with God 'in peace and equity', and through this engage the priests to 'keep knowledge'. I want to step off from this early coining of the word equity to explore some of its attributes linked to knowledge and hope, and consider education as a site for examining power and difference, drawing on a number of facets of comparative study.

The first comparative move I want to make is with the biography of Joseph Lauwerys, from which I want to take two themes with resonance today. The first is the theme of the equitable inclusion of refugees who come, like Lauwerys' family did, in time of war, to a country, where they did not speak the language. In 1914, Lauwerys' family came as refugees to England from Brussels. Their experience was that people who worked in education took them in, reaching across barriers and boundaries. This example of education as a site of hope speaks to us across more than a hundred years, when we witness today the biggest movement of people ever recorded in history, and when so many among the millions fleeing oppressions are children, hoping for education. An aspect of that hope is for people who will walk in equity with them. But all too often we disappoint these children and their families. No schools are provided and we are disoriented about the policies and practices we should adopt. Humanitarian aid is insufficient and only 2% of this goes on education. We may

know education is important for refugees but, as practitioners, researchers, taxpayers, voters, fellow human beings, we do not always take the appropriate next steps. Will understanding equity better help in this engagement?

This links with my second theme from Lauwerys' biography, which concerns seeing education policy and practice as a site of hope, and the equitable provision of education as a means to realise this. At the height of World War 2, at a time when it was not at all evident who would win or lose, and when the suffering and anxiety was immense, Lauwerys led an inquiry initiated by the committee of allied ministers of education. This met in London under R. A. Butler to plan educational reconstruction after the war. The work of this committee fed into the efforts that established UNESCO. Lauwerys' own writings at this time link equality with reaching across boundaries and hope. In a series of articles for *The New Era* written between 1944 and 1945, Lauwerys argued for education systems to work towards integration rather than deepening divisions, and to consider the ways in which individuals and institutions in education interact (Lauwerys, 1944; 1945a). He argued for the importance of developing a well informed public, through education. He wrote that education should seek to foster 'the humane ideals of social democracy and abate religious, racial, national and class conflicts'. His list of the means to do this included the curriculum, the organisation of schools, the provision of early childhood education, and education exchanges to widen horizons (Lauwerys, 1945a). In 1945, summing up a symposium on future education after the war, Lauwerys emphasised a vision of education oriented to 'free men living in equality' (Lauwerys, 1945b). I take this as a meaning, common at the time but dissonant to us, where men meant humans. The context of Lauwerys' writings have him emphasising equality, even if he did not have a language to articulate some of the important inequalities of gender we have come to understand in the decades that followed. Since that time Lauwerys expressed links of education with hope. The way that equity is positioned on this terrain and its relationship with equality, is something I want to explore in some depth.

My lecture will be organised around a number of intersecting questions. Firstly, what different approaches are apparent in how equity is used as a concept in education? How do aspects of comparative and international education feature in these discussions? How do these different approaches articulate the relationship between what works in education and the way that equity matters? I also want to consider the value of these comparative moves. As a community of scholars many of us, like Lauwerys, invest in education great aspiration to develop knowledge, skill, understanding, connect across social, cultural, economic, political and historical divisions, and contribute to some challenge to injustice. But a whole body of scholarship tells us how much education falls short of this ideal. How and why do we balance our critical insights and our hopes? Do we talk in the voice of the condemning prophet or in the tones of equity and hope and what is the relationship between them in education?

I want to centre my discussion on the notion of education as a complicated terrain in which equity and hope are mixed with many other dynamics. To illustrate this, I want to give you three examples of political activists, given long and brutal prison sentences for standing up for justice, freedom, and equality. All three, despite the inhumanity and degradation of their imprisonment, used the space for education, and never doubted that the process of education was a way to put into practice something of the dynamic of hope, equity and challenge to unjust structures.

My first example is Louise Michel. She was a school teacher, born in 1830 in the Haute-Marne region of France. She moved to Paris in 1856 and taught in a school for poor children in Montmartre, loving the work, her fellow teachers and the children (Michel, 1981, 38-40). She was an active participant in political circles in Paris, critical of the Second Empire, and a leading figure in the Paris Commune, elected President of the Women's Vigilance Committee. The Commune was defeated in May 1871 with immense brutality. Michel was arrested, held in a cell from which she could hear the executions of her comrades, and tried in December 1871. Her speech to the court included a defiant taunt to the authorities that 'any heart that beats for liberty has the right only to a

small lump of lead' (Michel, 1981, 87). However, she was not sentenced to death but condemned to imprisonment on New Caledonia in the South Pacific, at that time a French colony. Michel, together with 169 other deportees, 20 of whom were women, set off in 1873. Her imprisonment lasted six years, until in 1880, with a changing politics in France she was pardoned, and returned to a life of activism. What is striking for the theme of this lecture is that during her time of imprisonment she engaged very actively in education, opening a school, directing plays, and organising music.

The indigenous Melanesian people, the Kanaks, were being deprived of their land by French settlers in New Caledonia, including some political prisoners. But Louise Michel refused to participate in this dispossession. She learned the Kanak language, collected and wrote down Kanak legends and songs, and taught Kanak children and adults. She did this in the face of fury from the prison administrators, who decried her school for filling 'the heads of these Canaques with pernicious doctrines about humanity, justice, freedom and other useless things' (quoted in Maclellan, 2004, 15). She describes her active approach to teaching reading, writing and mathematics, the spaces she created so that the Kanaks she taught could reflect on the knowledge she imparted linked to their own understandings (Michel, 1981, 117-118). This image where she describes playing a piano, with some notes silent, and her Kanak pupils supplementing their own music into the spaces, appears to distil her pedagogic approach.

...the piano served me as a teaching method that produced good results. With this piano, whose broken hammers or strings made some notes in a run silent, the pupils realized there were gaps and filled them in with their own notes. Sometimes they sang notes from the piece they were studying, and at other times they searched their own musical phrases to fill the gaps. Thus they created motifs which were often strange and sometimes beautiful. ...I tried out this method on my regular schoolchildren as well as in my Sunday class for the Kanaks."(Michel, 1981, 118)

When the Kanaks rose in protest against their land dispossession Louise Michel reached across boundaries of race and economic philosophy to support their cause writing ‘The Kanaks were seeking the same liberty we had sought in the commune’. She constructed an image of a symbolic bond tying the struggles together in the story she told of two of her former pupils, Kanak rebel leaders, who came to see her the night before they went to join the insurgency. She gave them ‘my red scarf, the red scarf of the Commune, that I had hidden from every search’ (Michel, 1981, 112 . They were not seen again, but the image of education as a space in which people can come together and establish the ties of friendship and aspiration to challenge injustice, even in the face of the harsh repression of dispossession, imprisonment and scorn, invites us to ask what is it about this site of hope, and how does it talk to the notion of equity?

My second example of prisoners using the space of education, and, initially, an island confinement, somewhat like New Caledonia, to organise an alternative to the inhumanity of incarceration, is Antonio Gramsci , a journalist, member of the Italian Communist Party and an anti Fascist. Gramsci and other Communist Party deputies were arrested in November 1926, in the midst of a spate of repression by the Fascist government against its opponents. Sentenced, initially to five years imprisonment, under hastily imposed Laws on Public Security, Gramsci was given a sentence of internment on the island of Ustica, with a number of other political prisoners, from different political parties. Here they set up a school .

Gramsci’s account in a letter of December 1926 to his friend, the economist Pietro Sraffa describes the organisation and the connections made.

Here in Ustica there are thirty off us political prisoners; we’ve already initiated a series of elementary and general cultural course for the various groups of prisoners; we will also begin a series of lectures. Bordiga directs the scientific section, while I have the historical-literary section; this is the reason I’ve ordered certain particular books. Let’s hope that in this way we will spend our time without becoming completely brutalized and at the same

time help our friends, who represent the entire gamut of political parties and cultural backgrounds. Here with me there are Schiavello and Fiorio from Milan; among the Maximalists there is also the former deputy Conca, from Milan. Among the Unitarian Socialists there is Attorney Sbaraglini from Perugia and a magnificent Molinellese peasant type. There is a Republican from Massa and six Anarchists who have a complicated moral makeup; the rest are Communists, that is the great majority. There are three or four who are illiterate, or almost; the education of the others varies, but the general average is very low. All of them, however, are very glad to have the school, which they attend with great assiduity and diligence (Gramsci, 2011, 52-3)

It is clear that the educational space of the school the prisoners established provides a meeting ground across divisions of politics, regions and levels of learning. Their instruction is organised into a 'series' of lectures, and they consider distinctions between scientific and cultural-historical areas of knowledge. Books, available because Sraffa had established an open account for Gramsci with a bookseller in Milan (Buttigieg, 2002, 86). and the knowledge books hold are a central underpinning. The school is clearly a site of hope to guard against brutalisation and to nurture care.

In 1927, Gramsci was charged with further offenses, moved from internal exile to prisons in Milan and Rome, and in 1928 sentenced after a show trial to 20 years, with the prosecutor infamously claiming 'We must prevent this brain from functioning for twenty years' (Buttigieg, 2002, 88). In this the authorities failed. Gramsci, despite severe illness, loneliness, insomnia, depression, losing all his teeth, applied himself to study and writing with formidable organisation and energy and the ground-breaking *Prison Notebooks* remain a source of insight to this day.

Gramsci used reading, writing and conversation to work through in a very detailed manner issues, which he thought the conditions of imprisonment allowed him to study. He developed plans for a multifaceted and coherent project of study and investigation. In January 1929 Gramsci obtained permission from the prison authorities to write in his cell, and in February on the opening pages of

the first of his Prison Notebooks, he listed the main topics he intended to study. The list is illuminating, detailed, both wide ranging and highly focussed. As a curriculum it deals with history, literature, economics and sociology. The themes in history he proposes to study are the theory of history and historiography, the development of the Italian bourgeoisie to 1872, the formation of Italian intellectual groups, and the history of language. The issues of literature that concern him are the reasons for the success of popular serials, the treatment of the Epicureans by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*, the concept of folklore, and the circulation of different types of periodicals. His focus on politics concerns the origins and development of Catholic Action in Italy and the popular writings defending authoritarianism by the Catholic priest, Antonio Bresciani. His interest in sociology centres on his experiences of prison life. In thinking about economics he wants to investigate the southern question in Italy, the composition and emigration of the population of Italy, and Fordism in America. (Gramsci, 2011, 99) This is a broad programme, ranging widely across periods, disciplines, the general and the particular. In a letter in 1929 to Antonio Sanna, a Communist comrade serving a long sentence for anti-Fascist activity, Gramsci wrote of his approach to study, reading even the most random books 'with a purpose' and using the prison library 'to extract blood from a stone' (Buttigieg, 2002, 15). 'Every book, especially if it deals with history, can be worth reading. In every awful book one can find something useful...' (quoted in Buttigieg, 2002, 16). We see here a space of education as a terrain of self instruction with sequenced frameworks, engagement with how to understand the present, and reflection on what is useful. The blood from the stones evokes a symbol of hope, resonating with Louise Michel's red scarf.

Gramsci and his fellow prisoners organised to engage in discussion during exercise, with Gramsci sometime directing discussion to the themes he was studying. In his letters and Notebooks we have fragmented portrayals of these prison seminars and discussions with people who think differently, but always oriented to understanding and knowledge as an engagement with hope. Gramsci also wrote in detail to his wife about the education of his two sons. Because his prison letters were censored, and because, one may surmise, of his need to shield from the view of the authorities the

level of discussion amongst prisoners, we only have glimpses of the educational practices of the prisoners. They emerge in the lists of books Gramsci orders, what he sometimes describes as the 'zig zag' of his thoughts, in his reflection on how study helps calm him and allows him to transcend 'those vulgar and banal states of mind that are called pessimism and optimism' (Gramsci, 2011, 299). He wishes to synthesize and overcome those two emotions. In a letter to his younger brother, Carlo, he likens his long term of imprisonment to the mental state his brothers experienced as soldiers during World War 1, and the stoicism they had to cultivate

I'm a pessimist because of intelligence, but an optimist because of will. In all circumstances I think first of the worst possibility in order to set in motion all the reserves of my will and be in a position to knock down the obstacle. I have never entertained any illusions and I have never suffered disappointments. I have always taken care to arm myself with an unlimited patience, not passive, inert, but animated by perseverance (Gramsci, 2011, 2899)

I read this as an articulation of hope, not detached from an appreciation of what Gramsci calls the serious 'moral crisis' of today, but rooted in comparison with the past and reflection on the mental capacities he has to confront the present. He evokes it expressing a similarity, a kind of equity with what his brothers had experienced and had to confront. Part of the hope associated with equity as an educative space seem to be this reaching out for what connects people, drawing on some of the rigours of reflection. Education around equity and hope is not easy or instinctive, it is organised, detailed, highly critical, but also relational. In a poignant letter he wrote to his mother in December 1930 he remembers his time on Ustica as a kind of 'paradise of personal freedom, compared to my condition as a prisoner' (Gramsci, 2011, 367). But, he goes on to say that while he has lost his teeth, and no longer laughs with gusto as he used to, he has become wiser and 'enriched my experience of men and of things'. he has not lost his 'taste for life; everything still interests me, and while he says in dialect he can no longer' munch roasted beans' or fully taste the savour of life, he can imagine others doing so.

My last example is Robben Island in South Africa, where from the 1960s to 1991 anti-apartheid activists were imprisoned under most brutal conditions. The autobiographies of a number of political prisoners, most notably Nelson Mandela, the most famous, attest to the formidable educational programme the prisoners put in place despite the racism, the viciousness, and explicit denial of any of the qualities of kindness or encouragement we sometimes associated with education. In Mandela's autobiography he describes the prisoner organisation through which they established what they called the University of Robben Island, with prisoners becoming 'our own faculty, with our own professors, , our own curriculum, our own course ' (Mandela, 1994, 556.). They developed Syllabus A, to understand the history of the liberation struggle, the form, features, and strategies used by different groups, and what theories like Marxism or socialism could contribute to understand South African conditions (Mandela, 1994, 556-7). A number of Robben Island memoirs describe the classes that took place while prisoners were digging lime at the quarry. Fikile Bam, a prisoner on Robben Island between 1964 and 1975, outlined the organisation that underpinned this:

Just about anybody who had a degree or any form of education was allocated a subject to teach. Every morning...before going to work, the teachers would come together quickly and discuss their programme for the morning as to which periods would follow which at the workplace ... So there was always movement when you got to the workplace, little groups assembling in different places and you knew there were classes in progress (quoted in Lodge and Nasson, 1991, 301).

Other prisoners recount the vibrant atmosphere of symposiums on international relations, science, the energy crisis, the world education crisis (Desai, 2014, 74). The organisation resonates with the school Gramsci helped organise on Ustica. There are accounts of prisoners who could read helping to make books out of cement bags for those who could not, of those who had education organising classes at the appropriate level for those who had primary, secondary or degree level education, and giving structured lessons after they returned from work, reaching across the ANC/PAC divide (Desai,

2014, 26-7). Mandela describes the educative materials taken clandestinely to the general, non-political prisoner, on Robben Island, and the dialogues that unfolded with questions posed from direct experience, and requests for simplification to the abstractions (Mandela, 1994, 556-7). He also discusses the engagements with the new perspectives informed by black consciousness, brought by a younger generation of prisoners in the 1970s.

From other memoirs of Robben Island we have accounts of how prisoners studied for multiple degrees and observed an intense quiet during study periods at night (Desai, 2014, 2). Prisoners who were studying could not give books to those who were not enrolled, but they organised to keep and distribute books, transcribe those they borrowed from university libraries, sometimes staying up all night to do so. These hand written works were circulated clandestinely .

The curriculum of Robben island was not just about history, politics or economics. There were readings and performance of plays from Shakespeare and Sophocles, which a number of prison autobiographies describe as revelatory, because particular phrases, , characters and scenes were so resonant (Desai, 2014; Kathrada; Mandela) . There was a choir and a choir master. Prisoners organised and petitioned for the right to play and watch football, although many were not very fit, or particularly good sportsmen. The experience of the campaign across PAC/ANC/ BCM lines, the establishment of football clubs on the Island with chairs, secretaries, goals, and rules, all were seen as building some of the organisational insights necessary for a time beyond imprisonment (Korr and Close, 2008, 61).

Mandela formulated ideas about nurturing a vision of equity, focusing on hope. These themes thread through much of his writing and the speeches he made before and after his time on Robben Island. A letter to his former articled clerk, Douglas Lukhele, written while he was on Robben Island in 1970, makes an explicit connection between thoughts, freedom, education, equality and a challenge to unjust institutions.

To put it quite bluntly, Duggie, it is only my flesh and blood that are shut up behind these tight walls. Otherwise I remain cosmopolitan in my outlook; in my thoughts I am as free as a falcon. The anchor of my dreams is the collective wisdom of making as a whole. I am influenced more than ever by the conviction that social equality is the only basis of human happiness... It is on these issues that my thoughts revolve. They are centred on humans, the ideas for which they strive; on the new world that is emerging; the new generation that declares total war against all forms of cruelty, against any social order that upholds economic privilege for a minority and that condemns the mass of the population to poverty and disease, illiteracy and the host of evils that accompany a stratified society (Mandela, 2010, 182-3)

Discussing freedom and justice with Kanak pupils, were themes that gave Louise Michel hope. Developing the mental discipline to understand the historical conditions of inequality, and taking care of other prisoners nurtured hope for Gramsci, and Mandela's image of himself as the wandering falcon, trying to gain an oversight of humans struggling, partly through ideas and literacy, for social equality, places breadth of vision as a key facet of hope.

In all these three examples – Louise Michel working with the Kanaks on New Caledonia, Gramsci and his fellow prisoners talking of books and ideas, while walking beneath the gaze of hostile gaolers, and the organised engagement with, politics, Shakespeare and football on Robben Island – we see the education terrain, be it a school, a prison exercise yard, a cell, or a lime quarry, as a space of hope. We see a reaching across difference, as teachers did for Lauwerys. Louise Michel negotiated across languages, cultures and political aspirations with the Kanaks, symbolically tying her red scarf to connect them. Gramsci engaged through the format of the school on Ustica, in letters about how to study, in reading, writing, discussion and dialogue with people who held different views to his own – Anarchists, socialists, Communists from different wings of the Party – seeking to draw a nourishing blood from the harsh stones of the prison. This same negotiation

across difference between levels of education, and political perspective was a key thread in the Robben Island university. It was guided by a notion to give a wider view, deepen the appreciation of time, listen to different voices. Mandela's image of himself as a falcon evoked a wish to go to many places, many peoples, animated by a notion of equality.

I have selected these three instances, because they do not romanticise what is possible in education. They evoke the harshness of imprisonment, the stress on human relations, the constant presence of vulnerability and the closeness of illness and death, the fragility of access to knowledge. These difficult engagements are as much part of the experience as the commitment, the living challenge to the injustice of the powerful institutions they confront, the reaching beyond the present, a struggling to make sense of the past, and a cherishing of hope for education linked to some distant future.

This resonates for me with Lauwerys' work with the inter-ministerial committee during World War 2, and his initiatives from 1945. The post-war period of Lauwerys' great energy in international educational gatherings, was, as much recent scholarship has vividly portrayed, a period that was chaotic and brutal. Many of the traumas of the recent past were confronted clumsily, often viciously, setting in train many problems that remain profound. But in what must have often been a dispiriting and troubling time to live through Lauwerys does not ever seem to have lost a hope for education or equality. In this he echoes Michel, Gramsci and his comrades, and the Robben Island prisoners. It is this feature of hope around ideas of equality, and the challenge to unjust institutions that I want to link with equity.

I want now to explore this aspect of equity reaching across difference and considering education as a space of difficult hope by people experiencing the hardest times. I want to consider critically how this interpretation of equity in education compares with other frameworks.

Equity is a slippery word, and equity in education a many faceted concept. Groups of scholars use the term equity in education somewhat differently and I want to, try to sort out and clarify some of

the streams in this literature reflecting between the academic engagements and the practices on the island prisons I have sketched. One of the themes in discussion of equity in education concerns the relationship of what works and what matters in education policy and practice. Contrasts are sometimes drawn between the development of education systems which work, as evinced by some measurement of learning outcomes or other evaluations of efficiency linked with economic growth, political integration or health and well being. This notion of what works is often counter-posed sharply with an evocation of what matters, which many authors links with processes of normative aspiration or reflection, fluidity, flux, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Sometimes this expresses the ways that people struggle to articulate what is they have reason to value, and how they understand their experience of being in the world

I want to take this discussion between education in relation to what works and what matters and apply it to the terrain of education as a site of hope. The argument I want to make is that it is important to link what works with what matters. What works in my analysis should not be merely technocratic, but needs to be linked with practice, human located-ness, and what matters,. However, what matters, is not merely aspiration, a far off goal, it is also what is realised and made to work. Equity and hope appear to me important aspects of the connective tissue between these two nodes of education discussion.

The concept of equity in education has been discussed by an academic community of scholars, often centrally engaged with the contrast of what works and what matters in education. This theme is evident both in general policy studies in education and in comparative and international education. I want to distinguish four ways equity is used as a link idea in these analyses. Firstly there is a body of writing guided by principles, informed by some of the discussions in political philosophy regarding equity and equality, which stresses the significance of what matters, and singles out instances of this in practice to show that this can work, identifying some of the imperfections and areas that need further conceptual and practical engagement. This is the approach argued for in depth by Carlo Raffo

(2014) who defines equity in terms of 'the dynamics of educational fairness around young people's freedom to engage with valued educational capabilities' (10). Raffo links equity with agency in discussions of the capability approach, and shows how equity is a problem in many accounts of educational purpose. He distils a detailed framework for equity linked with purpose, quality and outcomes focusing on distribution and aspects of autonomy, presenting engagement with practice in the North west of England.

Tristan McCowan's recent article in *Compare* is another example of this approach. McCowan (2015) looks at equity in access to higher education, and defines equity in terms of fairness, discussing equality of opportunities for access in terms of three principles of equity – access, availability and horizontality of prestige between institutions. The discussion deploys a number of comparative moves, looking at how access and availability play out in Kenya, England and Brazil, drawing on international datasets, and generating the importance of horizontality between institutions as a feature of equity from an analysis of how inequalities persist.

Secondly there is an experiential engagement with the idea of equity, so that equity is associated with expanding access to education for groups who encounter particular kinds of discrimination, inequality and exclusion. This has been where much of the scholarship concerned with issues of race, gender, ethnicity, lack of citizenship, and disability cluster. Much of this writing starts with experiences of inequality, and is rightly critical of education systems and practices which reproduce or fail to confront inequalities in the wider society. This body of scholarship notes what fails to work in education, judging failures against a standard of equity, sometimes loosely defined, linked with equitable access, equitable participation, or aspects of outcome which change intergenerational inequalities. Hadjar and Gross' (2016) recently published edited collection poses the question from the point of view of the education system looking at the ways social relationships form education systems to shape inequalities across different axes looking at the links between macro, meso and micro levels of engagement. In understanding how inequality works, they chart a terrain through

which moves for equality would need to be put in place, and they utilise comparisons both of large multi-country datasets and small selected contexts in order to develop their analysis. The conclusion (Almendinger, 2016) distils some implications of what underpins equality and what might comprise some facets of equity. These are inclusive access, learning for life in ways that engage with contemporary problems, and connecting relevant actors in planning and evaluation. This distillation of equity evokes aspects of what works and what matters, and suggests equity happens at many different levels.

Thirdly there is a practice version of equity. I see this exemplified in Abdi and Richardson's (2008) collection of critical pedagogy in practice, where the authors show educational equity working for individuals or small groups, challenging the frameworks presented by colonialism, exclusionary forms of democracy or education systems that fail to recognise, for example, the conditions of indigenous girls in Canada, Aboriginal children in Australia, or the lived experience of postcolonial citizens in Africa. These accounts show how much and how deeply inequality is inscribed at the institution or system level, and how fragile the initiatives that challenge it often are.

Lastly there are definitional engagements with equity in education, teasing out the implications of different meanings, using practice to exemplify the semantic flexibility of the term, but applying it allusively rather than descriptively to real historical settings. My own initial discussion of the semantic history of equity took this form. I drew out 3 different meanings of the word equity which appear in English at different periods. There is an initial meaning expressing the walking with the powerful and angry, which I quoted at the beginning from Wycliff's translation of the Book of Malachai and which comes from an engagement with ideas, feelings and experience. There is, a slightly later meaning associated with forming equity courts, which stood above the courts of church and nobles and expresses equity as encoded in institutions. There is a third meaning of equity linked with money in the 18th century, which draws out some of its dynamism, fluidity and association with investment and exchanged. Drawing on these three meanings of equity I

distinguished for education what I called equity from the top, the middle and the bottom. The argument I made that it was necessary for all these levels or sites of equity to articulate. I made a selective use of examples, deploying what I have since come to characterise as a form of reflexive comparative education, considering parts to illuminate the whole, rather than the rigorous system led comparisons, that are so evident in much policy discussion.

One of the problems with an approach to faceting the meaning of equity is that the word, like a number of others which denote value – efficiency, empowerment, evidence- can be re-inscribed with meanings different from those originally formulated. Indeed equity is often found linked with growth, to argue for aspects of austerity, marketization, or the dismantling of processes of participation. This semantic hollowing out in which selective use of comparative examples is often deployed, is one reason I have wanted to ground this lecture in trying to understand equity, linked with aspirations of justice, freedom, equality and hope by people who challenged unjust institutions. I want to set these lived examples against uses of the word equity as a superficial cover for education policies that do not share a notion of what matters.

We see here a number of different approaches to engaging with different facets of equity, and deployment of quite established approaches to comparison (for example by MCCowan or the contributors to the Hadjar volume) and quite allusive meanings, for example drawing on critical pedagogy as exemplified in the contributions to Abdi and Richardson's collection or those of reflexive comparison I have suggested. Raffo provides us with an educational equity toolkit for use in schools and some experiences with using it will need to be documented.

In linking equity with a difficult terrain of education, I want to suggest that there is not one single approach to comparative method that is required, but rather of the importance of keeping the orientation of equity emerging from concerns with justice, equality and challenges to the hierarchies and exclusions of power.

In concluding my lecture I want to pose some critical questions regarding this academic sorting game and the world we live in, marked by so many injustices and inequalities. How far does all this classification and analytical distinction around equity take us, and do our insights regarding comparative and international education give us any particular vantage point? We invest in education great aspiration to develop knowledge, skill understanding, connect across social, economic, political and historical divisions and challenge unjust power. Like, democracy, the education systems, practices and institutions we have are highly imperfect. Yet they continue to be for many of us, as they were for Michel, Gramsci, Lauwerys and Mandela, sites of hope. Does equity take us further mitigating some of the imperfections? And how much further is good enough? What supplementary concepts can help anchor equity in education in difficult times? Given the enormity of the problems that confront us what direction is useful in the study of equity and education?

I think some of the academic work I have cited does help deepen our insight and there is enormous scope for more. In arguing for this I want to return to the accounts of Louise Michel, Gramsci and the Robben Island prisoners doing equity in education against the odds, building equity through practice in places that are both deeply marked by the inequalities of the societies around them, yet in those places people use education as a form of opposition, which challenges the prison power structures, and the inequalities they inscribe. They are doing what I have called equity from below. They were not unique in doing this, as there are many accounts of schools, universities, or adult education projects which establishing themselves to challenge injustice through education practice.

What can we draw from the accounts of the island prisons I have cited to understand contemporary times of austerity, inequality and upheaval ? All the education projects of the political prisoners suggest building equity against the odds, challenging a brutal power, in places carved out of harsh conditions. They seem particularly resonant in helping us to distinguish some of the practices and processes that may help to support the concept of equity in education remain both rooted in ideas about justice, equality and knowledge , and also able to take multiple routes through fragmented

experiences and across differences in a world that does not care much for the hope the concept offers, and indeed often uses equity or meritocracy as a myth to justify the continued power of those who have so much at the expense of those with little or nothing.

One question that has interested me in researching the three different instances of political prisoners using education as a space of hope is what minimum conditions must exist for political prisoners to engage in the kinds of educational practices I have outlined. They have deprivations, harsh conditions, abusive jailers, and long stretches of time cut off from people who they care for, but they do have access to books, imaginative worlds, and moments of association with other prisoners. When there are deprivations they often strategise to redistribute books or ideas. The islands where they are held are cut off, but not completely. Messages in various guises get through. They have very powerful frameworks of meaning making, given by their political experience which help them respond to the cruel places they are condemned to live. These frameworks were given by the commune and aspirations for gender equality and women's rights for Louise Michel, through the experience of Communist Party and systematic study of history for Gramsci, and through an appreciation the history of anti-apartheid opposition in South Africa for the Robben island prisoners. All three group are very firmly rooted in a particular framework of meaning, and, while they examine this critically, they have a starting point, which anchors them and their education project in relation to what matters. All three also have an aspiration point, be it delineated conceptually, experientially, or politically. What matters is not static, but moves across an arc of practice. This and the sociability of the educational practices and the human relationships that work, that reach across difference, listen to others, try to position knowledge sequentially, actively, critically, emotionally or imaginatively all seem to be key facets of the modalities of equity and hope. In the three accounts of the education projects on the island prisons these moves offer some niche of protection against the humiliations and denials of humanity.

Thus what works is the attempt to put equity and hope into practice. There are many failures losses, disappointments, deprivations and false starts, many attempts to deceive the prisoners, isolate or undermine them. I do not have illusions that the many faceted notion of equity in education is the only idea to guide contemporary hard times, but it an idea with some potential to confront unjust institutions, and a deep history, animated by hope.

References (incomplete)

Abdi, A. A., & Richardson, W. G. (Eds.). (2008). *Decolonizing democratic education: Trans-disciplinary dialogues*. Sense Publishers.

Buttigieg, J.

Desai

Gramsci, A.

Gramsci, A.

Hadjar, A. and Gross, C. 2016, *Education systems and inequalities. International comparisons* Bristol: Policy Press

Kathrada

Lauwerys, J. 1944

Lauwerys, J. 1945

Lodge, T. and Nasson, B

Maclellan

MacCowan, T

Mandela, N.

Mandela, N., 2010,

Michel, L.

Raffo, C. (2013). *Improving educational equity in urban contexts*. Abingdon: Routledge.