What Is “Social Justice” and How Does It Relate to Education?

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Abstract

Social justice is typically defined as relating to matters of distributive justice, based on various interpretations of what is “fair”. However, it can be argued that this conceptualisation of social justice is limited and should comprise of a more holistic view, through the consideration of recognitional and associational forms of justice. Further, this piece aims to demonstrate that educational institutions are capable of advancing these additional aspects of social justice through multicultural education, critical pedagogies and citizenship education.

Keywords: social justice; fairness; equality; equity; critical pedagogy

1. Introduction

Social justice is typically defined as relating to matters of distributive justice, based on various interpretations of what is “fair”. However, it can be argued that this conceptualisation of social justice is limited and should comprise of a more holistic view, through the consideration of recognitional and associational forms of justice. Further, this piece aims to demonstrate that educational institutions are capable of advancing these additional aspects of social justice through multicultural education, critical pedagogies and citizenship education.

2. What is “Social Justice”?

Social justice is a highly complex and multidimensional area of discussion. Rizvi (1998) holds that the difficulty in understanding social justice is due to the way it often relates to discourses which are historically and politically divergent. Despite this, Zajda, Majhanovich & Rust (2007) posit that social justice is most often conceptualised as relating to an egalitarian society, fundamentally based on equality and the recognition of human rights. Indeed, a survey of the relevant literature reveals that there is one underlying
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commonality in thought; a just society equates to fairness (Smith, 2012). This is supported by the United Nation’s definition which states that in today’s context social justice is generally regarded as, and synonymous with the idea of distributive justice (2006).

2.1 The Principles of Distributive Justice

Rawls (1971) views distributive justice as pertaining to a process in which social institutions govern the distribution of benefits, such as wealth and educational resources. The principles of distributive justice offer moral guidance for the structures which shape distribution (Lamont & Favor, 2012).

*Justice of Harmony:* This principle of justice relates to the distribution of social goods according to merit. Wesselingh (2011) explains that this principle is widely held today within schools, due to the growing meritocratisation of society. Further Wesselingh explains that this principle is based on an assumption of equality of opportunity. However, it is a misconception that within educational institutions every individual has an equal opportunity to achieve, due to the effects of external influences and individual differences, such as ethnicity, social class and gender (Vervoort, 1975). In reality, distribution based on this principle can reproduce social inequalities, which result from individual achievement because adverse external influences, which have an effect on an individual’s prospects go unacknowledged (Archer et al., 2002).

*Justice of Equality:* This principle calls for the equal distribution of material and non-material goods to all people, based on the notion that all individuals are equally deserving (Smith, 2012). According to Smith (2012), the aim of this principle is to equalise every individual’s opportunity, thereby producing fairer outcomes. Lynch (2000) views that equality within schools is typically regarded as a matter of distributing educational resources more fairly.

*Justice of Equity:* Rawls (1971) holds this egalitarian view of justice and considers that all people are entitled to equal rights and opportunities for success (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). However, Rawls (1971) additionally holds that there may be cases whereby the ways in which goods are distributed, ought to diverge from strict equality. This is known as the difference principle and allows that in cases of inequality, goods are allocated in such a way that they benefit the least advantaged members of society (Sandel, 2009; Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Bennett (2001) demonstrates that within education, the application of the principle of equity aims to provide equal opportunities for learners to reach their potential.
2.2 Criticism and Additional Aspects of Social Justice

Young (1990) has reasoned that to understand social justice as relating solely to the distribution of goods is incredibly restrictive. This is because this understanding of justice has been known to overlook institutional contexts and social constructs which have a profound influence on distributive arrangements. Further articulations of social justice theory include recognitional and associational justice. These concepts are vital in understanding how social justice should be understood within educational institutions.

2.2.1 Recognitional Justice

Recognitional justice is not concerned with socioeconomic injustices, as is the case with distributive justice. Rather, it focuses on cultural injustice, which according to Fraser (1996), is entrenched in social configurations of “representation, communication and interpretation” (p.7). Moreover, Fraser (1996) holds that recognitional justice is concerned with cultural domination, whereby individuals are exposed and subjected to a culture which is unfamiliar or antagonistic to one’s own. It is further related to non-recognition, through which groups are made imperceptible as well as disrespect, which occurs from habitual negative stereotypic representations of a marginalised culture (Fraser, 1996).

Recognitional justice further pertains to what Young (2009) terms “cultural imperialism” (p. 4). Cultural imperialism is one of five concepts which Young presents as sources of social injustice, referred to as the five faces of oppression (which includes exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.) Cultural imperialism according to Young (1990), comprises of a dominant group’s culture and frame of reference becoming homogeneous and ordained as the norm. It manifests in experiencing how the domineering values of a society render alternative meanings and perspectives invisible, while simultaneously stereotyping and characterising marginalised groups as Other (Young, 1990).

In relation to education, Lynch and Baker (2005) state that the lack of recognition and respect within educational institutions is one of the greatest inequalities various groups endure. According to Lynch and Baker (2005) within schools and colleges, cultural non-recognition is founded in a magnitude of domains, ranging from the curriculum to assessment and structural norms. Faced with pervasive and systemic injustice, learners from disadvantaged and minority backgrounds develop a sense of estrangement from the educational process which has a lasting adverse effect (Archer et al., 2002).

Recognitional justice should be regarded as a component of social justice because it holds that all humans are fundamentally equal. A sense of alienation and issues of
marginalisation which arise from differences in culture must be tackled through the promotion of inclusion within formal study environments and through the implementation of processes which respect diversities in pedagogy practices. As explained in section 3.1 multicultural education provides a framework from which this can be achieved.

2.2.2 Associational Justice

Associational justice is affiliated with an equality of power. It involves the development of egalitarian politics and the advancement of self-governing principles within all spheres of society, including the educational system (Lynch & Baker, 2005). Associational injustices can be found in unequal educational decision-making procedures and power relations which persist in the functions of the curriculum, pedagogies and assessment.

Marginalisation, as one of Young’s (1999) five faces of oppression, is explained as relating to an exclusion “from useful participation in social life” (p. 49). Young argues that the public should be included in collective dialogue and policymaking, within all milieus which require commitment, compliance and action, such as within schools and communities. Young posits that when institutions benefit certain groups to the detriment of others, democracy necessitates engagement and representation for the marginalised. This ensures that the disadvantaged have a voice which is heard and is paramount in the promotion of just outcomes (Gerwirtz, 2006).

Power and Gerwitz (2001), assert that due to the degree of alienation and marginalization experienced by both parents and students, educational institutions require progressive approaches in order to facilitate meaningful democratic participation in the management and organization of schools. This would assist in the mitigation of associational injustices, as well as provide a means of addressing economic and cultural injustices (Gerwitz, 2006). This is because democratic participation provides all stakeholders with the opportunity to identify cultural inequalities, which may be unwittingly preserved by schools, and empowers people to contribute to the promotion of policies and syllabi which opposes cultural domination and inspires recognition and respect (Gerwitz, 2006).

Social justice should therefore also be considered to entail democratic participation in decision-making. Active civic participation at a grassroots level is valuable because it encourages discussion among diverse groups which results in the promotion of socially just outcomes. As discussed in section 3.2, critical pedagogy offers a means of inspiring students to advance from passivity to participative forms of decision-making, thereby promoting associational and social justice.
3.1 Multicultural Education: Teaching for Inclusion and Diversity

The central objective of multicultural education is to reconstruct educational institutions in such a way that learners from diverse ethnic, gender and social class backgrounds (while also considering the significance of their intersection) experience educational equality (Banks, 1993). Further, Lynch and Baker (2005), explain that multicultural education teaches about diversity and develops strategies for eradicating cultural inequalities which occur as a result of non-recognition and further heighten social injustices.

Significantly, multicultural education is considered to be an educational reform movement, based on instilling the democratic values of justice, freedom and equality through strategies such as prejudice reduction (Bennett, 2001). Banks (1995) explains that ethnic groups frequently experience discrimination within schools. To illustrate this, there have recently been cases in South Africa where black girls were condemned and excluded from school for maintaining their natural hair, which was deemed by teachers to be “unruly” (Mahr, 2016). This demonstrates how schools can be complicit in institutionalised racism and further perpetuate social inequality.

Additionally, it stresses the importance of multiculturalism and the need to restructure educational institutions in such a way that all learners have an equal opportunity to learn. Multicultural education can also transform oppression through empowerment. Through fostering a sense of empowerment, teachers can guide students towards collective social action and reform. Sleeter (1991) posits that empowerment and multicultural education are highly interrelated, and the practised unification of these concepts, produces a type education which contributes towards establishing a partnership between oppressed and dominant groups. Through educating individuals about discrimination and political oppression, learners develop an awareness of social inequalities and are driven to become active agents of social change. This reform is vital for equity in participation, achievement and access to education.

Institutionalised knowledge sponsors inequality, promotes the will of the dominant group and disenfranchises marginalised groups. However, multicultural education empowers learners to be critical of knowledge which supports the status quo and enables them to take action. Thus, multicultural education is important in ensuring recognitional justice as it results in an educational environment which respects, recognises and empowers marginalized groups; leading to the creation of a more equal and socially just world.
3.2 Critical Pedagogy: Teaching for Liberation

Murrell (2006) holds that social justice necessitates a disposition towards noticing and eliminating the various systems of oppression which survive in the policies and practices of institutions. This conceptualisation of social justice most notably relates to education through critical pedagogy. According to Freire (1968), traditional methods of education or “banking” education reinforces the subjugation of individuals through the instructor “depositing” information into the minds of passive learners. Moreover, critical pedagogy is concerned with cultivating participatory politics and examining how structures of inequality are perpetually generated, so that they can be restructured (Kanpol, 1999).

Young (1990) argues that social justice entails the abolition of institutionalised oppression, and states that inequalities are grounded in policies and entrenched in unquestioned norms. As an alternative to banking education, critical pedagogy offers a framework which encourages the questioning and analysis of norms and structures which, in turn, enables individuals to work towards eradicating oppression through transforming pervasive social injustices (McLaren, 2003). It enables individuals to expose, examine and analyse elements of political and social oppression. Once a deep understanding of structural or internalised oppression is attained, it catalyses and empowers individuals to move towards egalitarianism in societies through activism (Gibson, 1999). Through this inclusive, student-centred approach to collective decision-making and participation, critical pedagogy is related to the promotion of associational justice.

Critical pedagogies seek to redistribute power. It allows for education to empower previously disadvantaged and marginalised people by presenting them with the opportunity to participate in collective decision-making, in accordance with the right to associational justice. Additionally, critical pedagogy relates to social justice by encouraging students to challenge inequitable social institutions and entrusting them to offer solutions for paving the way towards a more justice-oriented society (Hytten & Silvia, 2011).
4. Conclusion

Although the UN asserts that the central principle of social justice pertains to the notion of distributive justice, social justice remains a highly contested discourse. In the endeavour to understand the meaning of social justice, one must consider recognitional and associational justice as important elements. Education is related to social justice through multicultural education which promotes recognitional justice by implementing processes of inclusion which respects and empowers marginalised groups, thereby contributing to the development of a socially just world. While critical pedagogy is linked to associational justice by encouraging the analysis of structural inequalities and institutionalised oppression in the pursuit of responding to collectively identified social issues.
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