

2019

Social Justice

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Recommended Citation

Sonu, Debbie, "Social Justice" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs/588

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**KEY CONCEPTS IN
CURRICULUM STUDIES**
PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUNDAMENTALS

Edited by
JUDY WEARING, MARCEA INGERSOLL,
CHRISTOPHER DELUCA, BENJAMIN BOLDEN,
HOLLY OGDEN AND THEODORE MICHAEL CHRISTOU

ROUTLEDGE 

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Chapter 18

Social Justice

Debbie Sonu

ANCHOR TEXT

For centuries and across cultures, social justice has been concerned with human dignity, fairness, and a call to civic action. The term social originates from the Latin *socialis* or “allied,” or from *socius*, “friend,” with contemporary definitions relating to society, including social orderings and distributions. Justice is often associated with force of law, or an objective ruling tied to some form of truth; from Latin *iustitia*, “righteousness, equity,” from *isutus*, “upright, just.”

Introduction

By some accounts, the term “social justice” is attributed to the 19th century Italian priest Luigi Taparelli who opposed Protestant individualism by arguing cooperation, not competition, better promoted the character of goodness (Burke, 2010). His theory, ironically, defended hierarchies of class, intelligence, and race as divine ordinance, and instead relied on acts of charity, not social reform, as the vehicle for justice. Far from this, formative historical periods, including the Industrial Revolution, the rise of Marxism, and the Civil Rights and Freedom Struggles, pushed people into powerful coalitions that demanded a redistribution of economic and political power. Acknowledging that forms of discrimination are more than economic, new theories and practices began to emerge from feminist, postmodern, and anti-racist critiques, spurring interrelated branches of resistance organized to fight dehumanization, oppression, and exclusion across a variety of cultural communities and academic disciplines (Macrine, McLaren, & Hill, 2010).

In education, social justice is often about how school spaces are used to analyze structural and systemic injustice, with the intent of mobilizing young people as change agents prepared to transform the world. A pedagogy of cultural action (Freire, 1970) exposes students to the ways capitalist class relations shape the consciousness of individuals and through this realization, “conscientização,” seeks to revolt against and dismantle the devastating practices that inflict harm upon the body and fragment the psyche.

Social justice, after all, is a notion of how different people ought to live together. In contrast to capitalist critiques, post-colonial scholars have raised important questions about ethical engagements with difference, given the slippery conditions of colonialism (Stein & de Oliveira Andreotti, 2016). This includes recognizing the contingency of human experience, not as absolute and determined, but driven by subjective and personal passions, hopes, and fears, while, of course, maintaining a critical eye to the historical and present-day distribution of vulnerability across race, class, and other axes of discrimination.

Drawing on key scholars in the field, this anchor text presents social justice as an interdisciplinary site of struggle. While Marxist scholars, for example, express concern over the total domination of capitalism and capitalist thinking, the post-structural thinker challenges grand narratives by way of hybridity and ambivalent understandings of cultural production. Here, I argue that social justice is not a term to be taken for granted or taken lightly. Encompassing a labyrinth of variation, its meanings are ever-changing, charged, and contested.

As Teaching

Social justice in education assumes that schools and society are intertwined in a collective democratic project (Dewey, 1915). Teachers, then, positioned up-front and centre, must recognize the flawed ways in which social inequalities are legitimized and to see their teaching as a moral imperative that defends the common good (Adams & Bell, 1997; Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002). At the turn of the 21st century, scholarship based on these tenets flooded into teacher education under the monikers of: “teaching for social change,” “teaching to change the world,” “teaching for diversity and social justice,” and branched into overlapping fields, such as democratic citizenship (Parker, 2003); critical theory and pedagogy (Dardar, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003); multicultural and social reconstructionism (Sleeter, 1996); culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017); and Freirean thought and praxis in international contexts (Torres & Noguero, 2008).

With the school as a “training ground,” teachers became indispensable for preparing students to take charge of their lives and speak out for social change. Teacher lore and portraiture provide intimate examples of educators in their classrooms (Catone, 2016; Picower, 2012) including a proliferation of work published by Rethinking Schools and annual conferences of teacher-activist organizations such as the New York Collective of Radical Educators and Teachers 4 Social Justice, both in San Francisco and Chicago.

However, the standpoint from which social justice came into popularity both in schools and academia was largely centred on its disproportionately high percentage of White middle-class female members. This reignited critical

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questions around White privilege and what it means to teach as an “out-
sider” in racialized contexts (Valenzuela, 2016). As neoliberal school reforms
continue to tighten external control over curriculum, social justice spills
into out-of-school contexts where educators are afforded greater freedom to
pursue political issues oftentimes barred as too controversial by mainstream
measures. Attention returns to models for grassroots movements, both his-
torical antecedents (Payne & Sills Strickland, 2008) such as The Mississippi
Freedom Schools, Highlander Schools, Black Panther Liberation Schools,
as well as more contemporary emergings, such as Oceti Sakowin School at
Standing Rock and Freedom Square in Chicago. Consider IntegrateNYC, a
youth-driven advocacy group that began at Bronx Academy of Letters and
has grown to involve over 100 young people who follow examples set by
The Young Lords and the Black Panther Liberation Army to develop plat-
forms that demand racial integration in New York City schools.

Critiques Of

Beautifully said by Maxine Greene (1973): “there can only be a continuing
dialogue, engaging teachers and students in a conscious search for meanings
and possibilities ... for a surpassing of things as they are” (p. 191). As provoca-
tion, not presumption, Greene cautions that hasty translation of social justice
into curriculum and teaching can potentially silence young people from
grappling with their own views on what justice means. Exceptionally rele-
vant studies, such as Moje (1999), Ellsworth (1989), and Gore (1993) argue
that the theory of power grounding much of social justice education prob-
lematically assumes “power as property,” something to be used or given, as
repressive and reclaimable. This approach derails attention from the reality of
school structures that, given the pressures to perform and produce, can tend
to oversimplify beliefs on change, contradict efforts to share authority, and
limit the potential for empowerment, emancipation, even justice in schools.

In line, Giroux (1989) challenges teachers to be reflective about “polit-
ical and moral referents for the authority they assume in teaching particular
forms of knowledge” (p. 139). Under the charge of grand responsibility,
a teacher’s desire to rescue and cure can become so consuming that they
lose sight of the impossibly complex students before them (Taubman, 2000).
Additionally, “dramatic narratives” (Lesko & Bloom, 1998) of the heroic
teacher, amid the slander of the failing school, can lead to classroom scripts
where students are asked to surrender modes of thought and submit to the
concerns that teachers dictate: *Get committed to issues of social justice!*

In my own work, a social action project on school security sought to
expose the maltreatment of young people by New York City police of-
ficers, but did so at risk to the students who faced the same officers each
and every day. Required by the school to protest against those in positions
of authority, some students expressed strong resentment at having to fight

the deep-seated social ills created by adults themselves. While some students were assuredly aligned to the political causes of their teachers, some regarded social action as another graded assignment. When personal definitions of social justice came into conflict or were unrecognized by the institution, others called it “a trick” (Sonu, 2016). As Arendt (1977) reminds us, “education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it” (p. 196). We must take great care in how we grasp a world that is often difficult to bear, to then bring children into a condition that we ourselves wish to be otherwise. How can educators teach by “being with” students, rather than “being for” them (Freire, 1970)? To what, or to whom, do we commit?

As Equity

With focus on the disparities embedded within the system itself, Oakes, Lipton, Anderson, and Stillman (2013) define social justice education as one that provides rigorous, authentic, learning experiences with full and equal participation from all groups in society. This lack of access is not primarily a consequence of teachers and schools, but is inextricably linked to the unjust policies that yield poverty wages, segregated housing, targeted criminalization, and an absence of medical and mental health facilities (Anyon, 2005), an “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that has the cumulative effect of historic, economic, and moral deprivation. Political philosophers, like John Rawls in his 1985 book *A Theory of Justice* attempted to promote lofty conceptions of a distributive justice whereby material goods, access, and opportunity were linked with every individual’s equal rights to basic liberties. By the late 20th century, a politics of recognition came to replace redistributive efforts, ushering in a “post-socialist” political imaginary where movements were becoming defined more by culture than class (Fraser, 1997). Models for social justice must address both the traumatic effects of Western hypercapitalism and the rise in white supremacy and systemic racial privileges and policies. The keystone is how equal rights and a dignified life can be extended within a society marked by such unequal systems of value and worth.

Possible Futures

In her last book, Grace Lee Boggs (2012) writes: “We are beginning to understand that the world is always being made fresh and never finished; that activism can be the journey rather than the arrival” (p. 48). Who participates in this journey and how the term is operationalized will be critical to the future of social justice in education. No matter how difficult, we must continue to ask: Under what condition is it possible to teach for social justice? Does the origin of discrimination and hatred lie with ignorance? Is it the force of law that matters over ethics and love? In the darkest of times,

amid school closures and prison pipelines, discriminatory policies and high stakes testing, teacher activist and parent opt-out groups are fighting back. A watered-down and exclusionary school curriculum has impeded online platforms for shared knowledge around race, policing, and protest. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) and decolonizing methodologies demand authentic collaborations over adult-centred, damage-centred, exploitative relationships in research.

Social justice, in its effort to break the binds of normativity and its effects, appears across almost all areas of study, including cultural studies (Dimitriadis & Carlson, 2003), ecojustice, critical disabilities, peace education, and the arts. As Stuart Hall argued, politics is everywhere, present in soccer games to soap operas; the very conditions of our existence *are* cultural, political, economic, and existential. While activism explodes from its more traditional forms to embrace the healing power of poetry, theatre, and Indigenous practices for dialogue, it is from a reserve of care that we must work beyond self-interest in both policy and the personal, here and across the continents. The time for crossing borders and establishing an interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and international vision for social justice has come. Far from over, there is no escape out from the social justice project; the times, no matter how difficult, will always resuscitate it into possibility.

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