DISCOMFORTING TRUTHS: THE EMOTIONAL TERRAIN OF UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper seeks to problematise the discourse of social justice in education and engage educational practitioners in tensions that exist in understanding the theory of social justice. I argue that social justice in education is constructed in a way that seeks to disturb not only the tensions of conceptualisation but the traditional power relations present in educational practice as well. This paper is influenced by an eclectic mix of theoretical sources; I have adopted, as a critical lens, poststructuralist, postmodernist, feminist as well as postcolonial theories to interrogate the social justice discourse. While the paper argues that the concept social justice is dynamic and fluid, it attempts to draw the discomforting truths or tensions of conceptualizing social justice. The debates around the conceptualisation of social justice will enable us to better understand the theoretical position which would take us closer to understand social justice in education.

Keywords: Social justice in education, distributive justice, marginalisation and empowerment

1. INTRODUCTION

In the first part of the paper I discuss the critical interpretation of social justice from poststructuralist and postmodernist perspectives. The focus is on social justice, in the context of a form of deconstruction that empowers the individual, with reference to the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. In the second part of the paper I discuss the conflation between two forms of justice: social and distributive justice. This leads, in the third part, to framing social justice in education, where I argue that it can be understood as a set of interrelated practices and that education practitioners should organise themselves against any form of exclusion or marginalisation, with reference to feminist and postmodernist discourses. In the fourth part of the paper, on the role of educators as critical instruments in social justice, I suggest that educators should be instrumental to eliminate inequalities, characterized by antisexist, antiracist and antihomophobic curricula; this is informed by the work of Peter McLaren and Kevin Kumashiro on anti-oppressive education. I conclude the paper by discussing the praxis of social justice in education, hopefully showing how social arrangements are imagined, constructed and challenged.

2.   CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social justice seems to be on the lips of everyone these days; however, the understanding of social justice differs greatly and with this diversity of meaning comes diversity of understanding. This paper will explore and deconstruct the points of contestation over competing definitions-/meanings/understandings of social justice in education. The critical interpretation of social justice, according to the poststructuralist, is to examine the relationship between deconstruction and justice. Derrida's deconstruction of justice amplifies the problematisation of the foundations of law, morality and politics, for deconstruction has always attempted to show up the paradoxes structuring the philosophical discourse on a moral subject. Derrida observes that force is inscribed in the very concept of law, meaning there is no law without force. Legitimate force can be used by the lawgiver; it is inextricably bound to our legal and moral sense of justice (Sinnerbrink, 2006). To guide my argument, Derrida (1996) asserts that the authority of law has a "mystical" foundation: a foundation that makes justificatory discourse possible. For Derrida, the rule of law or justice, being as it is the product of historical circumstance, is socially constructed. He further asserts that social justice couched within the law sometimes fails in its aspiration to guarantee human rights and freedoms and is often used to sanction the brutal and treacherous actions of oppressive regimes (Dooley, 1999).

To understand social justice in education, using Foucault's theoretical lens; he challenges hegemony in educational policies and practices, advocates educational reform and societal structures that move towards equity rather than marginalisation. An account of how I made use of Foucault's thinking in trying to understand the concept social justice in education follows my interpretation of Foucault's work on "parrhesia" translated from Greek into English as free speech, and "parrhesiastes" as a free citizen, not a slave who took on "parrhesiazesthai" i.e. the activity of free speech, saying everything that challenges the status quo and its structured relations of power (Huckaby, 2008). The starting point of social justice, according to Foucault, is to challenge the power wielded by the strong unto the weak. For Foucault (1997), advocating social justice in education would mean for the benefit of people who live and are being educated under conditions of poverty, racial and ethnic disparities, in addition to discrimination because of their national origin and language. He maintains that to remain committed to the struggles of marginalized people, one needs to engage in the "games of truth" on educational and societal hegemony, challenging power relations that subjugate people and maintaining their "parrhesia".

Foucault understands social justice in education as challenging hegemony, i.e. resistance within relations of power. This is significant for any educator, namely to address the needs of students and to know how the relations of power can work to the benefit of disadvantaged and marginalised students.

He also offers, not a way out, but another view of relations of power through resistance to power relations in the formation of freedom. Foucault states,

> If one of them were completely at the other's disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn't be any relations of power. Thus, in order for power relations to come into play, there must be at least a certain degree of freedom on both sides… This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance, there would be no power relations at all. (Foucault, 1997: 292)

I regard Foucault's discourse as important in order for me to conceptualise social justice in education where educators challenge hegemony and critically question unjust social systems, as well as to understand how research methodologies, findings and theories support inequality.

Social justice in education can also be understood as countering dominant power relations by enabling individual storytelling, thereby "creating a platform" for those usually assumed to be without it; these elements are central to the social justice in education objectives. Social justice in education does not treat power as the property of the more powerful who afford it to the relatively powerless, however, it challenges the more powerful – who obtained their power by dominating available air spaces (Griffiths, 2003). She further asserts that "giving voice is just a kind ventriloquism; or that hearing the voice of relatively powerless people gives relatively more powerful ones a management tool with which to control them." (Griffiths, 2003: 84), given the fact that there is more than one understanding of power and empowerment.

Based on the above interpretation of what is social justice in education, it seems the concept is open to myriad interpretations. The meaning of the concept social justice in education is challenging because of its use across diverse theoretical or conceptual understanding. It seems scholars have conflated the idea of social justice with the notions of distributive justice. The following sections will attempt to iron out the differences that seem to exist between the understanding or meaning of the two contested terrains/paradigms/conceptual frameworks, i.e. social justice and distributive justice.

3. CONFLATION BETWEEN THE TWO FORMS OF JUSTICE: SOCIAL AND DISTRIBUTIVE

Young (1990) asserts that people who are located within the framework of a distributive paradigm argue for equality of distribution; when it is met, their claims for justice are completely satisfied. It seems that distributive paradigm, set goals of assuring students' equal access to the same materials. However, social justice, in short, is not something to be handed down or to be received. Power, which is the essential "good" of social justice, cannot be seen as being distributed by some superior agency.

Rather, power is not something "owned" but is the expression of a relationship, and it has to be analysed within a dynamic view of social relations and forces which produce power structures. In this section I argue that the consideration of distributive justice alone does not lead to social justice, meaning that the distribution of resources inappropriately restricts the scope of social justice, because it leaves untouched social relations and forms of injustice such as domination, coercion, marginalisation, exclusion, subjugation, oppression, deprivation and several forms of inequality.

As Young (1990) points out, distributive justice is not identical to social justice: there is a difference between giving everybody equal rights and equal opportunities within the existing oppressive system (i.e. distributive justice), and changing the conditions which gave rise to inequality or oppression in the first place (i.e. social justice). Critical scholars such as Derrida, Dooley, Foucault and Huckaby argue that we first need to question the agenda of curriculum of which each student has to have his/her share. The notable fact I wish to convey is that distributive justice and social justice are not equal, nor does the one cover the area of the other.

Distributive justice finds its strength in the egalitarian ideals where each person has an equal share, such as dispensation is necessary to justice. What seems to be absent from the egalitarian concept is the emancipatory emphasis found in social justice. Social justice seems to emphasise the liberation agenda that seeks to free people from segregation, marginalisation, disenfranchisement, exploitation, sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, classism and all other sorts of injustices.

Young (1990) asserts that a paradigm shift is necessary when it comes to justice: we need to move away from the tradition that interprets justice in terms of the distribution of material goods and social positions. She challenges the distributive paradigm, arguing that social justice means the elimination of institutionalised domination and oppression. The paradigm should shift from distributive patterns to issues of participation in deliberation and decision-making. She further argues that social justice has a particular interest in oppression and domination as the social conditions that define injustice, acting as the institutional constraints on self-development, total emancipation and self-determination.

Enslin (2006) emphasises that this approach to justice has clear relevance to justice in education, acknowledging that the unequal distribution of funds for school facilities, teacher education and learning support materials is an indicator of inequality when it comes to different social classes, different genders and different ethnic and cultural groups. Enslin's theorisation that, if we want to pursue the agenda of social justice in education, it requires not only that oppression, disenfranchisement, subjugation and marginalisation in various shapes and sizes be done away with but also that democracy be pursued, as it forms the foundation of and the condition for social justice.

I assume that if social justice is equated with distributive justice then social justice becomes meagre. We cannot equate social justice and distributive justice; even if absolute equality in educational opportunities can be achieved, social justice will continue to make demands – demands that fall outside the purview of distributive forms of justice. To cite an example of the South African education system due to the injustice of the colonisation crystallised in apartheid, education in this country has always been replete with injustices. The call for social justice in education is an attempt to address the social inequalities present in an unequal society. My understanding of social justice in education is that it is not only about promoting educational reform to perpetuate status quo norms of power and privileges acting in the name of social justice. Given the above conflation and tensions in understanding the two paradigms, my view is that social justice in education should address the social inequalities present in an unjust society or education institutions or practices. I theorised that social justice in education should retain its ability to disrupt and dismantle the surviving traces of injustice, whether in terms of unequal teaching, learning materials or other resources. Social justice in education is not about saving disenfranchised and marginalised people from domination and then oppressing one's enemies, because that would perpetuate injustice.

4.   NUANCE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

Social justice in education can be better understood as a set of interrelated practices; these forms of practices emphasise empathy, equality and the appreciation of otherness, which Derrida (1978) coined as différance, meaning that the sameness which is not identical is required for the effective exercising of social justice in education. Social justice practitioners in education should organise themselves against any form of exclusion and marginalisation, and these pedagogues have to focus on how social arrangements are imagined, constructed and challenged. Social justice in education should join the postcolonial chorus of voices that is opposed to individuals who are at the periphery and students who are outside spheres of power as opposed to those in the margin.

While the feminists and postmodernists have their own framing of social justice in education, each of these discourses has helped to increase our understanding of the tensions between conceptualisation, appeal and inadequacies of the understanding. Each of these discourses also gives us the picture about social arrangements or relations, and alternatives we ought to consider when interpreting and theorising about social justice in education. Feminists point to the pervasive effects of gender relations; they question whether equality is equivalent or a component of liberal theories of justice, where they have to assimilate pre-existing male norms (Flax, 1993). Feminists' argument is that universal sameness which is not identical is located within liberalism, which has a distinctly masculine character.

Postmodernists point to logo-centrism and pay particular attention to the play of differences or the absence thereof. They do not regard equality, whether defined as equal treatment for equals or as due process for all, as necessarily essential to justice (Lyotard and Thebaud, 1985). They also question the definition and conceptualisation of reason in transcendental grounding and the claim that liberation, justice and equality are not based on static meaning, but that self-understanding and social justice in education depend on the primacy of reason (Flax, 1993). Postmodernists further argue that it is unnecessary – and even dangerous – to assume that the existence and practice of social justice require any transcendental grounding.

Postmodernists (see Derrida, 1978 and 1981, Habermas, 1985, Lyotard, 1984 and 1985) claim that they are committed to freeing the play of difference and such play cannot be wide-ranging when relations of domination are pervasive. They argue that for social justice to be realised in education there is a need for disruptions and the erosion of power of the grand narratives or discourses. This process will contribute to the clearing of spaces in which tensions exist. This means that social justice in education will emphasise discourses for self-determination, empowering language and the invention of an education curriculum that is empowering.

Social justice in education can also be understood as the possibility of modes of relatedness with others and to reconcile us or to make us welcome the existence of gaps between ourselves and others; it teaches us how to reconcile or tolerate differences between ourselves and others without domination, how to differ from others, and how to challenge the limits or restrictions placed on us by others (Flax, 1990). Social justice then is understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed or frozen set of procedures or predetermined standards to which we must conform. Social justice in education in this paper is understood as a human rights issue, as pronounced in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. This is the right not to be discriminated against. This guarantees everyone the kind of education that does not discriminate on the grounds of differences and capabilities. According to Habermas (1985) rights express relationships, not things; they are constructed via processes of social struggle, mutual justification, and reciprocal recognition.

5. EDUCATORS AS CRITICAL INSTRUMENTS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Educators could play a pivotal role as instruments of social justice; however, they come to play with myriads of conflation of discourses which are internalised. Education for social justice could play a role in sensitising educators to have knowledge of "the other". For educators to be models of social justice they should develop pedagogies of empowerment for transformation based on the understanding of power and privilege.

Pedagogy for empowerment raises questions about the relationship between the margins and centres of power in educational institutions, and is concerned with reclaiming power. It rejects the distinctions between high and popular culture so as to make curriculum knowledge responsive to everyday knowledge that diversely constitutes peoples' histories (Nkoane, 2009).

This paper theorises about social justice in education as a discourse supportive and sensitive to the plight of all human beings, especially those who have been oppressed, excluded and marginalised. McLaren (2008) argues that social justice in education is a way of thinking about, negotiating and transforming the relationships within classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, institutional structures of the school as well as the social and material relations of the wider community. Educators as instruments of change could eliminate inequalities on the basis of social class, characterised by a wide array of antisexist, antiracist and antihomophobic classroom-based curricula.

For social justice to bear fruit in education, not a single student should be treated as an object or means to an instrumental end. In keeping with the ideas of Giroux (2000) and other critical theorists, social justice has an important role to play in developing new forms of pedagogy and disputing the narrow ways in which knowledge is constructed. Educators as instruments of social justice represent a modern way to achieve enlightenment through reasoning and understanding students' live world experiences and what it means to be human. According to Quin (2009) the work of social justice educators explicitly aims to be anti-oppressive through seeking to empower educators and students to act in anti-oppressive ways for social justice. She further asserts that social justice education is about being and becoming a "social-justice" – not someone trying to behave in a "just" or "fair" manner.

When schools unconsciously support the dominant hegemony as well as classed, raced, gendered and sexist norms, Kumashiro (2004) reminds us (most especially educators) to work against such educational "common sense". According to Kumashiro (2004: xxiii), "common sense does not tell us that this is what schools could be doing; it tells us that this and only this is what schools should be doing..." "It's just common sense that schools teach these things and students do those things." Educators as instruments of change and social justice need to question both the purpose of schooling and why things are the way they are. Teachers must plant the seeds for social justice education by creating and fostering critical perspectives in education and shaking students' belief to the core. Educators need to be conscious of the way the "common sense" norms are passed on and disseminated and may begin to acknowledge their own oppressive pedagogies as well as to learn from this "unintended curriculum".

Furthermore, Kumashiro (2004: 44-46) draws on "queer theory" for educators to have insight into education and to prepare them to be activists.

He uses this concept to mean something empowering and disruptive and as a reminder for us to never stop asking: "What is the problematic norm?" and: "How do our practices contribute to oppression?" However, he seeks to sensitise educators to the fact that "queer theory" is not the prescription for better schools, but rather a way of thinking about them and questioning the anti-oppressive pedagogical thinking in all the subjects or learning areas that teachers. Educators need to question the prescriptive notions of education and to consider the role social justice education can play.

McLaren (2005) also suggests some principles intended to provide educators with pivotal points of reference in the development of their social justice education practices: students must come to understand what the myths of the dominant discourses are: precisely myths which oppress and marginalise them but which can be transformative. Educators must consider the possibility for new makings of reality, the new makings are collectively shared, social enterprise in which the voices of all participants must be heard; and educators must get students to understand how the myths of the dominant discourses are: precisely myths which oppress and marginalise them but which can be transcended through transformative action (Nkoane 2009). The educator who is instrumental about social justice in education is critical about how knowledge and realities are constructed and will advocate human dynamics, fluidity of human interaction and relations, regarding the student as a speaking and interpreting being who has to be approached differently from objects in a science laboratory (see Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen and Kurzwell, 1985; Mahlomaholo and Matobako, 2006; Nkoane, 2009).

6.   CONCLUSION

This paper draws attention to the ways in which various discourses conceptualise social justice in education. These discourses can lend to the social justice in education, with its reference to equality and empowerment, a tone similar to that of constructive disruption and the dismantling of hegemony; it also reminds us of how our unconscious practices contribute to oppression. I argue that social justice in education is not a prescription but that it enables us to question and rethink our education practices. I share the pedagogical philosophy that could assist in reducing the unconscious marginalisation and exclusion of "others" who are the same but not identical. This paper also demonstrates that power is only produced by human agency and this power is dangerous if its nature goes unchecked. For all the discourses that are left unspoken and unchallenged, many will be pushed further into the margins. This paper suggests then an activist's role to propagate the anti-oppressive education.

I conclude this paper by arguing for an inclusive social cooperation and social justice not reducible to distributive justice – a social justice without disrespect and the systematic disadvantages that some groups of people have to suffer.

(For example: women segregated on the basis of their reproductive biology.) I also argue against the oppression experienced by homosexual people, just because our society and practices hold up heterosexual desire as normative; indeed. I reject any categorizing of some people as deviant, whatever norms (social or otherwise) we might choose to apply.

Finally I stand against any form of racial and ethnocentric domination, where the dominant discourse holds the norms of intelligence, respectability, trustworthiness and ingenuity as typical of "whiteness" rather than of "blackness". With this I conclude my paper which attempted to publicise the discomforting truths and emotional terrain of trying to understand social justice in education.

7.   REFERENCES

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