A social justice approach to education

Social justice is broadly understood as relating to ideas of fairness, equity, and inclusion. A social justice approach recognises the impact of power relations at both societal and individual levels as well as the way that certain structural features of societies create inequities in the distribution of resources and opportunities for decision-making. In addition, a social justice approach seeks different ways to make people's situations more equitable.

Education is seen as pivotal in responding to and challenging social injustices, and creating conditions for tolerance, equality and participation that will create a more secure, peaceful and cohesive society. In schools, social justice is also associated with attempts to redress the ways in which schooling reinforces and reproduces inequality. Socio-economic disadvantage is associated with lower achievement levels throughout school, lower attainment of qualifications, and poor numeracy, literacy and student engagement. Producing equitable outcomes for students is one of the greatest challenges facing the school sector.

The main features of a social justice approach to education

Social justice pedagogies have emerged from a rich and complex set of activist and consciousness-raising movements, such as the Civil Rights movement and feminism, as well as pedagogies such as Multicultural Education, all of which emphasise positive ethnic identity, social action, and a commitment to addressing inequality and injustice. Social justice pedagogies also build on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, who saw education as the practice of freedom. Freire advocated for a dialogic approach in which oppressed people come to understand that their situation is a result of the dynamics of powerful social interests rather than a natural order, and therefore can be transformed[1]. Freire argued that education should be centered on the resources students bring to learning rather than on established knowledge mandated by the dominant groups, which is linked to the experiential education suggested by John Dewey. Culturally relevant teaching also emerged from these traditions, with the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings on successful pedagogies for African-American students[2]. Culturally relevant teaching informs social justice pedagogy with its focus on personal and cultural experiences as content for learning, a critical stance to received knowledge, and real-life and relevant applications.

A social justice approach involves both teachers and students in recognising social injustices. Social inequality is an issue for countries across the world, with the countries with the largest disparities experiencing greater health problems, higher mortality, poorer mental health, poor social cohesion, and higher rates of crime, violence and incarceration. Socioeconomic disparities have increased in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past few decades, with some groups of people more likely to experience higher levels of poverty, poor housing and unsafe neighbourhoods, as well as bullying, discrimination and racism. Māori and Pasifika peoples are over-represented in socio-economically disadvantaged communities and are particularly at risk. Injustices might also include difficulties for minority cultural groups in terms of having their philosophies, practices, experiences, knowledge and aspirations recognised and valued.

A social justice pedagogy encourages students to challenge and transform unequal power relationships which limit people's opportunities and potential. Teachers make issues of power and privilege explicit

and provide students with opportunities to deconstruct harmful images and affirm positive ones. Students are encouraged to decide how structures that create social inequities might be changed, and to identify the steps they can take to achieve that change.

A commitment to social justice requires inclusive practice which ensures that everyone is included, heard and empowered in social processes for decision-making within the school, such as school councils, particularly those who are marginalised or disadvantaged.

Social justice approaches to education aim to support all students to achieve at a high standard, ensuring that educational approaches serve to disrupt patterns of inequality in society. Teachers have high expectations for all students, and are confident that students have skills and knowledge from their homes and communities that can be built upon to support achievement in school subjects, disciplines and discourses.

What empirical evidence is there for this philosophy in practice?

Research shows that structural social, political and economic factors do influence students' achievement. For example, while many Pasifika students start school fluent in their own language and with rich knowledge and experiences, they soon begin to fail within the education system, for reasons linked to structural inequities and the disconnect and dismissal of their cultural values, knowledge and experiences[3]. Empirical evidence for the importance of culturally responsive teaching programmes in helping raise the achievement of disadvantaged students is extensive. For example, incorporating the language and culture of Pasifika students into curricular programmes and establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships with students and their families enhances Pasifika students' learning[4]. Similar achievement is noted with Te Kotahitanga (a cross-curricular intervention designed to raise the achievement of Māori in mainstream secondary schools[5]), which was found to accelerate Māori students' achievement to three times that of Māori students in comparison schools[6].

Social justice approaches in teaching practice

Social justice approaches and themes in education are included in various school subjects, including the social sciences, environmental education, and health and physical education, as well as in culturally responsive initiatives. However, it is an area of education that can easily become marginalised by a focus on performance standards and teaching to the test. It is also important to be aware that the amount and quality of empirical evidence for these approaches vary.

Explicit, direct teaching

Claims for explicit, direct teaching can be seen to be driven by a social justice approach that attributes inequities in learning outcomes to approaches that disadvantage and discriminate against children with diverse cultural capital and background knowledge (funds of knowledge about and skills related to academic content). Some approaches may be more suited to students with particular background knowledge that more easily aligns with a school's curriculum, but other students may require a level of explicit teaching to ensure that they have the necessary foundational knowledge for learning.

Targeted support

A social justice approach to education is also reflected in strategies that aim to offer targeted support to specific groups of students. For example, efforts to support refugees and new immigrants might focus on facilitating the learning of English as an additional language. Rather than seeing students' success as

the result of individual application and effort, teaching aims to support students to overcome barriers to their success.

Culturally responsive pedagogies

A social justice approach can be seen in initiatives such as *Ka Hikitia – Ka Hāpaitia | The Māori Education Strategy*, the *Pasifika Education Plan* and the more recent *Supporting Pasifika Success – Action Plan for Pasifika Education*, which aim to address issues of privilege and marginalisation. These approaches recognise students as bringing positive attributes and strengths to the classroom, which are used as starting points from which to build learning experiences and support responsive teaching and learning. This is not about a tokenistic celebration of cultural diversity, however, which can lead to the stigmatisation of particular cultural groups and reinforce inequalities rather than improve equity.

Bicultural pedagogies

Bicultural pedagogies are focused on ensuring that the aspirations of indigenous peoples are reflected within them and that indigenous philosophies, practices, knowledge and experience are included and appreciated. Teachers engage students in indigenous learning processes such as learning through dialogue and debate, or learning through connections to the wider indigenous communities and places of significance. They are honest about the historical experiences of indigenous people in relation to colonisation, displacement and discrimination, and the current situations of indigenous people in terms of inequities, ongoing discrimination and over-representation in negative indicators of health and wellbeing.

Active advocacy

Advocacy is promoted when teachers support students to recognise the structures and patterns that determine the relative power of different groups in society, and the way in which some voices are more dominant in decision-making. Teachers can engage students in realising greater social justice in the community through fundraising and involvement in activities to improve the environment around them and the conditions of others. Teachers can aim to identify and mitigate school policies, practices and curricula that sustain injustices for certain students.

Curriculum integration

Curriculum integration models which aim to organise the curriculum around relevant problems and issues that are collaboratively identified by students can be used to address issues of democracy, respect and diversity as well as social justice and advocacy.

Democratic school processes

This is reflected in a range of practices in which schools engage to elicit, listen and attend to the stories and perspectives of all the members of the school community. Schools that provide an open climate for discussing issues and inviting student involvement in school life both model democratic values and promote civic engagement and knowledge. Active citizenship that promotes social justice can be learned through the model of school processes, the way that students' lives in school are structured, how students are treated and respected, and the opportunities they are given.

Citizenship education

Citizenship education aims to support students to become informed, critically literate, socially engaged, ethically responsible and respectful of diversity. Citizenship education can promote a social justice lens

when developing political literacy and civic skills in students by raising awareness of the structural or institutional barriers to participation for some groups. Citizenship education also involves students in finding ways to make a contribution to the wellbeing and development of society, which can be directed towards addressing issues of social justice.

References & further reading

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Endnotes

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