

Social Justice Pedagogy as a Vehicle for Epistemological Development

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

We are living in a highly fragile world with complex and interconnected social, economic and environmental issues. 'Injustice' is widely recognised as the cause as well as an outcome of these complex issues. Higher education is widely considered as a hope to build learners' capacities to contribute towards societal transformation by addressing the issues of injustice. Rooted in the theory of oppression, social justice education makes oppression visible by applying social justice pedagogies. The paper theorises social justice pedagogies as those pedagogies that engage learners in questioning and examining taken-for-granted assumptions, provide intellectual challenge, allow active engagement with the real-world content, involve critical dialogue and reflection, and modelling of compassion. Social justice pedagogies create authentic conditions for epistemological development of learners from absolute knowing to contextual knowing. Epistemological development is a pre-condition for societal transformation.

Full paper

The concept of social justice education has been a part educational discourse at least for the past 50 years. However, the term social justice pedagogy (SJP) entered into educational literature relatively recently. A scoping Google Scholar search indicated that the most of the literature on social justice pedagogy has been produced in the past 15 years. There is lack of clarity on what constitutes SJP. Scholars have mostly used Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy (Chapman et al., 2010; Gerdin, 2024) and Nancy Fraser's (2009) concept of social justice (including redistribution, recognition, and representation) to conceptualise

SJP (Briffett-Aktaş et al., 2025; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Taş et al., 2025). Rooted in the social justice framework of Fraser, Wong et al (2025) developed a model of SJP that included students' voice as a pedagogical method. They implemented the model and found that the model was useful and "students' recognition and representation of their identity groups are enhanced, and the knowledge held by them is redistributed to peers and the lecturer through active participation" (p.21). They also note that it helped in promoting self-learning and critical thinking. On the other hand, Osman and Hornsby (2018) argue that social change and the centrality of human agency are central focus of social justice, transformative pedagogies. Our paper advances the debate on SJP by defining them in terms of the outcome (epistemological development) they lead to.

Conklin and Hughes (2016) believe that SJP provides intellectual challenge to the students. This challenge can be provided by engaging students in big questions, tracing connections between different issues and thinking about feasible solutions. Understanding connections between different issues is a pre-condition for holistic thinking and understanding a problem in its wider context. Bourn et al. (2023) noted that student teachers who were a part of their study demonstrated an understanding of social, economic and environmental issues but they lacked an understanding of the interconnections between different issues. Adams and Bell (2016) also emphasise upon active engagement with the issues of social injustice. They have described SJP as a kind of pedagogy that includes content related to social justice issues, collaboration, reflection, dialogue, inclusion and active engagement with the issues of social injustice. In addition to these processes "compassion" has also been identified as a key element of SJP (Conklin & Hughes, 2016).

Social justice education has its roots in the theory of oppression (Adams et al., 2007) which is a structural phenomenon that operates through invisible rules, unquestioned norms and symbols. Social justice education makes the oppression visible by empowering the learners to ask questions, re-label things, and co-create new knowledge. In classrooms, social justice education is enacted by applying social justice pedagogies. We argue that to achieve the wider goal of making oppression visible and societal transformation, transformation in epistemological beliefs is a pre-condition.

Epistemological beliefs refer to the beliefs about knowledge (Schraw, 2013) or the nature of knowledge and its production (Schommer-Aikins, 2004). Baxter-Magolda (1987) classified epistemological beliefs under four categories: 1) The absolute knowing (the learner views knowledge as certain/ unchanging); 2) Transitional knowing (the learner views some knowledge as uncertain); 3) Independent knowing (the learner views most knowledge as uncertain and engage in independent thinking); 4) Contextual knowing (the learner views knowledge as uncertain and evolving). Epistemological development refers to students moving from absolute knowing to contextual knowing.

Building on the ideas of Freire (1970), Kincheloe (2001), Adams and Bell (2016) and Conklin and Hughes (2016), Baxter-Magolda (1987), we argue that co-creation of knowledge is central to help the learners move from absolute knowing to contextual knowing. SJP will involve learning content focusing on real-world issues of injustice and provides opportunities for authentic engagement with the content through critical dialogue, critical reflection leading to co-construction of new knowledge. Most importantly, teacher is a co-learner in the process of learning and is actively engaged with the learning content and the other learners. In other words, SJP creates authentic conditions to help epistemological development of the learners from the absolute knowers to contextual knowers. Such conditions are established by including content that is related to real-world issues of injustice and critical processes such as critical dialogue and critical reflection. Giroux (1992) describes authentic conditions as those conditions which engage learners in critical dialogue on knowledge, its production and how it is transformed by one's relationships with others and the larger world (Giroux 1992).