

The Quest for Social Justice in Higher Education Praxis

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Abstract: Education is fundamental in answering to and challenging a myriad of social injustices. It is required to support and generate conditions for equality and participation that will establish a further secure, harmonious, and well-organised society. Social justice is then a crucial concern for a model social structure advocating the promotion of human rights and justice in the offering of inclusive higher education. Nonetheless, there are many difficulties that inhibit the progress of students from less advantaged families in their quest for social mobility through education provision. While there is talk of equal treatment via wider access to education is this in fact the case? Numerous advantages and disadvantages combine and become part and parcel of social institutions as evidenced in numerous higher education institutions operating in rural areas in South Africa. Invariably, those residing in rural communities tend to be black and generally attend poorly resourced institutions facing many challenges emanating from the apartheid past. Many of the students in such higher education institutions (HEIs) have far less access to opportunities for advancement than their counterparts living in middle and upper-middle class neighbourhoods in more affluent suburbs in towns and cities. Apart from adequate finances, students are additionally plagued by the lack of food and appropriate basic healthcare and may even battle to access transport to and from an HEI. Yet educational institutions are called upon to develop a just society by promoting in students both instinctive and critical reflections of the nature of being and the theory of knowledge. True justice necessitates that adequate resources must be provided for all citizens, and the state must critically take into consideration those who are still relegated to the sidelines in many ways. This article argues that HEIs can promote greater social justice by integrating it fully into the curriculum and that teaching and learning must be infused with a social justice focus. Incapacity undoubtedly inhibits the development of students' capabilities and social equality is thus wholly relevant to justice in society. There is also a need for culturally responsive teaching and learning if we are to establish a fully inclusive and equitable education system.

Keywords: Higher education; equity; social justice; cultural responsiveness.

Introduction

Social justice in higher education praxis includes fair play and inclusivity for all when it comes to practices and policies. Thus, in a society where there is inequity and a marginalisation of many people, this is both unethical and immoral. For justice to truly exist in higher education praxis in any society there is need for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to embrace total inclusivity. This means they need to provide access to opportunities and possess resources for students and academics alike irrespective of one's race, gender, creed, diversity, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation, or any other factor. All people should be able to have secure and fulfilling lives in an environment where systemic inequalities are mitigated, and inclusive education is available to all. Social justice in higher education praxis safeguards that institutions embrace the notion of fairness and are fully supportive of students, faculty, and staff emanating from diverse backgrounds. Cultural sensitivity is of paramount importance (Freire, 1998). In a democratic society, all students must have an opportunity to attain a quality education. Having said that, there are of course huge challenges posed such as poverty, which makes it very difficult for those in marginalized communities to make a meaningful contribution in their lives to themselves and others.

The South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996), sought to heal the divisions of the past and to forge a democratic society based on the values of human dignity and equality, stressing the promotion of human rights, social justice and freedom. It recognized the sad past divisions and injustices perpetrated and founded its Constitution

on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights in order to reconcile past divisions, and it also sought to lay the foundation for a democratic and open society where each citizen is equally protected.

The current President Cyril Ramaphosa has stated that education is the best way to end the inequality and that “It is through education that we can realise the goal of a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society...It is through education that we can give full expression to the rights enshrined in our constitution. Our society still bears the scars of its divided past... From the beginning of the 20th century, the struggle of our people for equal and quality education was indistinguishable from the struggle for freedom” (Theirworld, 2018). The government is still fighting this battle admirably, but far more needs to be done in terms of praxis in higher education as well as in the crafting of needed policies for a transformed education leading to a better future for all South Africans. Leaders in Higher Education Institutions need to be solid agents of change as they embrace diversity and promote sustainable management strategies while driving inclusive education in which social justice is manifested. It is evident that structural social, political, and also economic factors do still negatively impact on students’ achievement in higher education.

Education is both a public good and a basic human right and HEIs have a moral accountability to safeguard that their practices in general terms contribute to building a just and equitable society. Twenty years ago, Chisholm (2004) asserted that South Africa had a great deal to do to arrive at a just society. Not much has truly changed since then. The key issue was that the country inherited structural inequalities during the apartheid era so that historically ‘white’ institutions received far greater funding than ‘Black’ institutions. Thus, the historically disadvantaged and those emanating from low-income circumstances were sidelined despite the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) which is a government-funded programme that delivers financial aid to penurious students who wish to attend public universities or TVET colleges in South Africa. Through NSFAS, bursaries or loans are provided to students from low-income families who are found to meet the entitlement conditions. The bursaries offered cover the tuition fees, accommodation, food and travel allowances for “full time” students, but only tuition fees for “part time” students (NSFAS, 2017). The NSFAS programme has been conceived and implemented to help ensure that many students from low-income families have at least the chance of pursuing higher education, but this is not enough. The promotion of true social justice calls for greater participatory and democratic policy formulation, and most importantly sound implementation. Policies are one thing, and implementation is often another. This means that a greater open discussion of social justice and truly education is needed including all stakeholders.

Blackmur (2024) states that there is indeed very slow progress in transforming higher education and this the result of numerous factors. These, inter-alia included a lack of collective understanding on the issue of transformation, institutional lethargy, governance failures, poor funding and insufficient oversight by the Department of Higher Education and Training. He pointed out that three key public policy areas need to be analysed and focused on by the government:

“First, assessing the quality of the government’s understanding of the higher education system’s performance and the availability of reliable data for policymaking. Second, addressing matters of funding for higher education. It is not at all clear that the taxpayer can, or should, fund the acquisition of university qualifications. And third, discussing public policy challenges related to calls for the decolonisation of higher education curricula. This has the potential to change radically the nature of higher education and thus requires major participation by the government” (Blackmur, 2024).

Institutional practices must be aligned and fully focused to support the desired social justice agenda. The notion that the curricula need to be decolonised is critically important to consider. What does this mean in reality and what should be taught or omitted from the curriculum? The curricula should of necessity be more appropriate to the socio-economic and cultural actualities of the majority Black population. As well-argued by Masoga (2020), African epistemologies and Indigenous knowledge systems as well as African religious and ritual lore must be considered in an inclusive higher education system. This will invariably require a balancing act between state-driven transformation and higher education institutional autonomy. The existence of historically high racial inequality in South African HEIs has grave consequences for justice, especially considering the previously disadvantaged ‘black’ HEIs which are often located in impoverished rural areas. The Council on Higher Education (CHE 2014) states student success is “enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable” (CHE 2014, 1). This is unlikely in the current scenario given the many challenges still posed.

It is currently the case that numerous previously ‘Black’ institutions are still besieged with large student-to-academic staff ratios, poor infrastructure, and far greater funding is required if they are to prevail and add real value as they could. Many students, especially those in rural settings, continue to have very limited access to needed technology, and infrastructure. Predictably, there are also poor completion rates for many students emanating from deprived socio-economic backgrounds and those not adequately capable to engage with learning materials in the language of

instruction which is predominantly English. Many students from socio-economically deprived backgrounds have no access to suitable technology and cannot participate in online platforms as required and when students are not proficient in their studies to begin with, and technology is not used correctly, numerous problems could arise (Harven, 2013). To many students from marginalized groups, the systemic barriers in higher education are insurmountable.

North (2009) states that there are five social justice literacies to imagine and strive for in a truly democratic education system including the functional, critical, relational, democratic and visionary. Sleeter (2008) in similar vein speaks of four critical dimensions of social justice teaching that include situating families and communities within an analysis of structural disparities; developing reciprocal relationships with students, relatives, and communities; teaching by building on students' cultures, languages, experiences, and individualities; and by creating and teaching a fully inclusive curriculum that integrates marginalized viewpoints and clearly addresses the serious issues of inequity and power relations.

Higher education institutions must be adequately equipped and need to practice social justice in order to prime the future leaders who can traverse, and successfully attend to the many national and challenges posed across the globe. Social justice is thus associated with efforts being made to redress inequality and produce equitable outcomes for all students. Pendlebury and Enslin (2004) assert that "The idea of inclusive education provides a useful focus for an account of social justice. Inclusive education means overcoming the barriers to participation of all in education, so as to extend to all learners the human right to education and the right to participation in an inclusive polity... Procedural justice and the achievement of social justice in outcomes, it seems, are intricately related."

Paulo Freire and Key elements in a Social Justice method for Higher Education Institutions

Paulo Freire the renowned Brazilian educator and philosopher was a foremost advocate of critical pedagogy. He argued that social justice in HEIs should first and foremost strive to promote equality and justice in their pedagogies. In his *Pedagogia do Oprimido (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 2000)*, Freire endeavours to challenge students to question the notion of domination, and the beliefs and practices that govern education. He argued that the oppression that is faced by marginalized groups globally is not a natural one or even an inevitability. Freire favoured a Dialogic Approach in which there is genuine dialogue between educators and students and in which there is respect for all participants which promotes needed mutual learning (Freire, 2000). Consequently, students are encouraged to be active participants in educational praxis which needs to be a collective process in which there is both reflection and action on their part, and in which they become agents of positive change as they tackle various problems and seek concerted solutions to them. In some academic environments, educators may have racial attitudes, expectations and prejudices which adversely affect student outcomes (Chin et al., 2020; Boser, 2014) and these need to be eliminated.

Freire (2014) maintained that all education should challenge learners and that it ought to necessitate that students begin to scrutinize existing power structures and the inequality intrinsically in them. Education is the vehicle for social justice transformation. When there is discussion and critical thought unpacking of societal issues in an academic setting, students have an opportunity to get to understand that their circumstances are not an unchangeable outcome but are largely shaped by forces that are both historical and social (Freire, 2000). They are then better positioned to confront systems that are deficient and make them better. An education system and its curricula must then be fully inclusive, and participatory and allow debate and discussion to prevail. A curriculum must be reflective of varied perspectives and should in essence challenge the prevalent power structures. Education must be culturally receptive if students are going to engage in it in any remotely meaningful manner and this means that pedagogical practices must be aligned to the cultural experience of students (Gay, 2010; Freire,1973).

General considerations of social justice in HEIs

In a spirit of social justice, the institutional cultures of all HEIs need to promote policies that specify financial support for students and have outreach programmes for the community in what is termed community engagement. Academic support for the marginalised must constantly be on the radar. From a staffing perspective, HEIs must ensure that there are fair treatment and opportunities for all stakeholders. We should also take note of cultural differences that exist between students and educators since these may at times restrict the learning prospects for the former (Aydin, 2017).

A social justice angle must ensure that educators and students alike are cognisant of huge social injustices in society. Education must be fully inclusive. The education offered must motivate students to contest and transmute unequal power relationships which generally limit the opportunities and potential of people. Social justice-oriented pedagogies must be crafted that advance critical engagement with a wide range of pressing societal issues. Only in this way can students hope to become well-informed and morally upright citizens. Education for reflective thinking is of immense value to individuals and society. Creative thinking intersects with critical thinking (Bailin, 1988) because

thinking about the rationalisation of a particular event or phenomenon demands a level of creative imagination in forming credible explanatory assumptions. Higher-order thinking skills such as critical thinking must be vigorously promoted and taught, and they must include analysis, synthesis and evaluation which are cross-cutting cognitive processes (Anderson et al. 2001, 269–270).

By including students in debates and discussions, this enhances their sense of well-being and belonging and they invariably achieve better results. Social justice debates guide students to identify the dreadful social, ethical, moral and often political price of sustaining oppressive systems. Students must be taught to be respectful of human diversity and their education should affirm the capability of all people to join with others in forging a better world in which the collective well-being is promoted. Social justice thus demands engaging everybody in collective processes on the idea that there is enough to meet the needs of all peoples irrespective of their background, gender, race, culture etcetera. Fair and just diverse practices and perspectives must be considered and non-negotiable and need to be promoted in all educational initiatives. This means that course content must be inclusive of a wide range of content and perspectives. Only in this way can HEIs become transformative, equitable and just societal entities.

Universities need to increase the amount of time they engage students in a range of activities that advocate social justice, such as for example in community engagement and projects for supporting social organisations such as orphanages and old age homes, and they can even involve them in fundraising projects for the homeless. This will serve to promote a strong social ethos at a time when there are increasing global challenges. Students must be empowered through making their voices heard as they

express their opinions and values relating to unjust happening. Universities can organize intensive courses together with all students including people with disabilities, on human rights and equality issues. The students can essentially develop their own events around a research problem on the same themes and organise and complete them under the guidance of academics in what is generally termed participatory action research.

Higher education institutions are already doing so, but more must be done to better prepare students by promoting a more thorough understanding of what democracy should entail, as well as greater community and international engagement initiatives. In these important endeavours interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and even multidisciplinary solutions to deal with an ever-growing myriad of extensive and interconnected challenges should be sought. In addition, schemes for concentrating on common societal challenges on the African continent and beyond, must be crafted. Such endeavours will serve the purpose of skilling students and priming them to impact positively on society's global challenges in profound ways through a social justice lens.

Social justice must work against avarice, egotism and disgust and strive to drive kindness and empathy by promoting equity and inclusion. This implies that educators need to be trained if they are to suitably address the needs of culturally diverse student populations (Kumar et al., 2015). They ought to have at least a fair knowledge of different groups' histories, experiences, ways of making meaning and values because this is important in striving for the social justice objective of recognition and respect (Bell, 2023). There is also a dire need for greater educational opportunities for the female sex, given that gender disparities often hamper their ability to reach their full potential. Gender equity in education must thus also concentrate on eliminating the barriers to inhibiting educational achievement for women.

Students must be taught to evaluate their beliefs and preconceived notions, and investigative research methods must be vigorously promoted that rely on sound critical thinking, solid evidence and logic. They should be taught to research themselves and reflect in a spirit of self-inquiry as to how they relate to others. Educators equally need to be well prepared in their training, to deal with diversity and be caring, open-minded, authentic and critically conscious at all times (Plust et al., 2021). Social justice must also clearly stress that everyone warrants equal educational, economic, social and political rights, and should thus have prospects of improving themselves, if of course they wish to do so.

Educators and students have important roles to play. Bell (2023) stresses the importance of:

“Challenging hierarchy requires confronting the ideological frameworks, historical legacies, and institutional patterns and practices that unequally structure social relations...Understanding the dynamics of oppression is important for developing effective strategies to counteract it...Social justice requires a commitment toward equality and possibility, and a belief in the capacity of people to transform our world”.

Social justice must tackle delicate issues in both educational policy making and practice (Lawyer, 2018). Furthermore, educators should have apposite critical cultural as well as racial consciousness as they go about their service to society (Milner, 2007) and they should impart these to their students. Lawyer (2018) asserts that higher education is the prime context for enacting social justice. It should also be stressed that teaching approaches can either perpetuate or

dismantle social injustices in multicultural education offerings and settings. The educator needs to consider the perspectives of the students and their worldviews and afford them opportunities to ask questions and deliberate on important issues and knowledge must be understood to be socially constructed and is not something beyond human values and subjectivity (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Jacobs (2021:3) maintains that a holistic approach to teaching and learning is required and it needs to consider the social background and the individual. She states: “a holistic approach to teaching and learning would focus on our students, within an understanding of the social context of universities and the nature of the knowledge produced there.”

Student success must also be supported by promoting greater engagement with disciplinary knowledge and academic literacies. Thus, curriculum design and institutional transformation with regard to teaching and learning and support for the students is critical (Collett, Dison & Du Plooy, 2024). The educator and students need to be able to better comprehend sociopolitical diversity as such (Ross, 2014) and the pressing social justice problems posed in society in general need to be reflected upon. Educators and all academics play a vital role in promoting social justice in education. They need to promote equity and include social justice principles in their curricula and in their teaching practices. While there are existing policies that promote equity and inclusive practices, there are still some systemic challenges. If social justice in higher education is to be realised, it is imperative to guarantee that crafted policies are efficiently implemented and well-supervised. While it is the role of the state to provide sound education, the private sector must also be brought on board far more to offer and provide need support as required.

Conclusion

An inclusive and diverse society is the desired objective of driving social justice in higher education praxis. Socially just education is indisputably good praxis and is essential, given that all people should be treated equally and with respect and they should be afforded their human rights on an ongoing basis. Individuals emanating from all backgrounds must have access the same educational opportunities so that social justice prevails. This will safeguard that all students have the opportunity to succeed and attain their full potential. For this to be realised, a strong and energised education management and sound leadership are essential as well as carefully crafted national higher education policies.

A social justice approach to education must be carefully reconsidered and revised strategies are needed in seeking to provide targeted support to specific groups of students so that equity may prevail, and greater inclusion is achieved (Thomas & Loxley, 2001). The aspirations of all South Africans must be reflected within policies and actual practices while indigenous philosophy such as Ubuntu, and local practices and knowledge must be further promoted. The curricula should continue to probe problems faced nationally and globally and students should be deliberating on true democracy, diversity and social justice issues that exist and that require sustainable solutions. Critical thinking must be vigorously promoted along with the development of objectivity so that students develop the ability to transcend social and even cultural frameworks. They should be positioned and skilled to analyse situations without bias or any self-interest interfering in their frame of reference. Greater social justice in education is sorely needed since there have been and still are systemic inequalities and injustices prevailing in the current education system. An ongoing dialogue about race and racism globally should be in place. Marginalized groups in especially rural settings are still marginalized and deprived. Improved policies and practices that promote equality and justice are vital to alleviate their lot.

In conclusion, social justice in higher education is a fundamental principle that aims to provide equal opportunities and support to all students, regardless of their background. Promoting fairness, inclusivity, and empathy not only helps individuals reach their full potential but also creates a more just and equitable society for all. All students irrespective of race or any other factor must be imbued with sense of belonging and acceptance. It is time to once and for all break the cycle of disadvantage and limit the disparities that exist as far as possible for students in higher education towards a brighter South African and African future. It is only through sound socially just higher education that the political inclusion which is required for true democracy to operate effectively and a more just society can ultimately be realised.

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