

Social justice as a conduit for broadening curriculum access: Stories from classroom teachers

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It has become public knowledge that teachers have gradually been called to teach learners to world-class standards in order to enable them to participate actively in the global economy. This has fuelled a debate on how teachers should be prepared to fulfil this new role. In-service programmes on social justice and education have often been critiqued for failing to build teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogical skills which are essential for facilitating learners' access to the curriculum. This paper takes a position that teaching is an inescapably political act that often (if not always) involves ideas, power and access to learning and life opportunities. The study presented in this paper was designed to explore how teachers used social justice pedagogy as a conduit for making the curriculum accessible to all their learners. Data for this study were generated from self-reflexive action research reports from a sample of 20 teachers submitted as part of the assessment requirements for the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programme. The data were used to understand 1) How teachers conceptualised and understood social justice, and 2) How teachers utilised these understandings in broadening curriculum access for their learners. The study found that participants conceptualised and understood social justice on a basis of a philosophy of education as transformation, which often called on them to traverse political borders. For these teachers, teaching for social justice meant that education was construed as a means to break the cycle of social ills, victimhood and hegemony. The study presented some emerging thoughts on how knowledge about social justice in education could be deployed by teachers to broaden access to and in the curriculum.

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Introduction

The field of social justice has grown immensely. However, this growth has evolved with challenges in deepening and broadening understanding of social justice. In most instances, conceptualisation of social justice has been framed within binary, 'either or' understandings of identity. That is, identity construction positions people either as oppressors or oppressed depending on the social identity group that one belongs to. Such binary understandings have resulted in many individuals' being positioned or actively positioning themselves as working for or against social justice, while being oblivious of the complexities involved in working for social justice. This often makes it difficult for identity to be conceptualised and understood within frameworks that allow for intersectionality, simultaneity and saliency (Crenshaw, 1993; Jones & McEwen, 2000). The notion of 'social justice' is used quite prolifically, with almost all teachers branding themselves as a social justice teacher. In a sense, the notion of social justice has become a catchphrase for political correctness and is in itself incapable of assisting teachers to interrogate and explore patterns of their internalised dominance in their attempt to broaden access to and in the curriculum for all learners.

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa, with its formulation of the new constitutional promise of social justice, equity and equality, the concept of social justice has generally been used as a politically correct term to express one's allegiance to the new constitutional promise – far removed from the ideals of the new constitutional framework (Ramphela, 2012). The conceptualisation of social justice in this paper is that social justice denotes something more than a label such as being a social justice teacher – social justice is a political commitment that requires action and activism. Social justice is less about declaring oneself as being 'saved,' and more about the activism to live and work towards fairness, equity, peace and equality.

In our work in in-service education for social justice, we have recognised that our students come with a complex matrix of social identities. These identities often texture the way in which our students view the world, others and their teaching spaces.

The contested nature of schooling often seduces teachers to participate in struggles that invite them to meddle in identity construction politics. As a foundation for living and working for social justice, it is vital for teachers to engage critically with issues of social justice in relation to how they position themselves in these struggles. As teachers working to teach for social justice, we often hear stories from our students of being confronted with situations that require them to traverse borders of dominant discourses. Our reading of their stories is that this is often preceded by an awareness of a particular way in which society is constructed – that is, an awareness of the existence of oppressive practices and attitudes. As authors of this paper, we acknowledge that the extent to which their social identities are shaped, constructed

and reconstructed by their experiences as students in the ACE: Values and Human Rights in Education is a matter of further investigation. We know from our experience of working with the students that when they begin participating in this specialisation, they are usually unaware of what it means to teach for social justice. It is only in the journey that they begin to develop alternative lenses for viewing the world, which often carries a promise about the way in which they might eventually think and act in the world.

From our experience as lecturers, we have learned that students often join the ACE: Values and Human Rights in Education specialisation with a generally uncritical understanding of their roles as teachers working in schooling contexts that are affected by a complex matrix of social, political, historical and economic factors. In a sense, they are unaware of the hegemonic ideologies underpinning the act of educating and the role that ideologies play in constructing and positioning learners and teachers. For instance, our students are initially unaware of the complex realities that their learners have to contend with daily. More often than not, students tend to cast their lenses outside of their own practice and focus on learners whom they believe are the source of the problems that make curriculum access difficult and sometimes impossible. It is our view that this thought process of students fails to acknowledge the extent to which their beliefs and actions prevent learners from accessing the curriculum. This is compounded by systemic barriers that reinforce the marginalisation of already disempowered learners. Teachers need to understand that all learners must have access to the curriculum. Therefore, access to and in the curriculum is not just for the chosen few, but for all learners, even those who are not the norm.

Our argument should be clear from the above, namely that social justice could be deployed as a useful conduit to ensure access to and in the curriculum for all learners. We refute the argument that social justice is devoid of an academic foundation and, hence, weak in its usefulness as a means to achieve academic ends. Embedded in the substance of our argument is the understanding that teaching is an inescapably political act. We believe that social justice education should serve the function of empowering teachers' pedagogy. It should also open up space for them to reflect on their own pedagogical practices and hold them responsible for ensuring access to and in the curriculum for all their learners.

The notion of social justice

The lens used to frame and understand this study is located within the notion of social justice. As referred to earlier in this paper, social justice is a shifting, elusive and dynamic concept. In the context of this paper, social justice is defined as both a process and a goal. Adams, Bell and Griffins (1997:4) describe the ultimate goal of social justice education as 'full and equal participation of all groups in society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs'. For instance, in this study, the intention is to broaden curriculum access to ensure that learners not only have access to the

curriculum, but that conditions are such that they are able to participate in the curriculum in ways that meet their individual needs. So, the vision of social justice education is to ensure equitable distribution of resources and opportunities to all learners. With regard to the process towards realising this goal, processes and mechanisms should be 'democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities' (Adams et al., 1997:4). For example, access to and in the curriculum must make it possible for learners to use their current capacities to develop their full potential. That is, they must not only be present, but also be active players in the curriculum, and accrue maximum benefits irrespective of their individual differences.

Therefore, the notion of social justice is an ethical frame in which equity and the achievement of a primary social trajectory are elevated above all else. According to Rawls (1972), two principles define social justice. The first principle is based on individuals' having an equal right to basic liberties in a society. For instance, all learners have equal right to education – education is not a preserve for the few; it is what every learner has to enjoy. The second principle involves giving the greatest social and economic benefits to those least advantaged. Social justice is not about making things equal; it is about equity, and equity, in turn, is about the fair distribution of resources and opportunities. Therefore, it is about recognising that, for instance, learners do not begin from the same starting point; and about ensuring that there are supportive structures which would allow learners who are more disadvantaged to participate actively.

The emerging social justice discourse calls for teachers working for social justice to interrogate the assumptions and structural dynamics which drive practices that could pose insurmountable barriers and invisible ceilings for learners who are aspiring to achieve their potential by means of education. In this sense, social justice is about levelling the ground so that all learners have access to and in the curriculum. This could mean differentiation of the curriculum to ensure that all learners do not only feel welcome, but are indeed regarded as legitimate players whose experiences are used to advance their participation. In essence, social justice education aims to broaden access to and in the social, political and economic goods available in a particular society.

The study

Context, research methodology and design

The purpose of the ACE programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is to provide professional and academic advancement for practising teachers. This means that the programme aims to develop and enrich teachers' praxis in their situated contexts. The ACE: Values and Human Rights in Education, in particular, aims to develop social justice educators who, through their participation in the specialisation, become more and more empowered, and begin to work in more anti-oppressive ways with

their learners. The modules provide activities, texts and theories for development in their field of specialisation as teachers for a more just and equitable society.

The study presented in this paper is located within the qualitative tradition. We read teachers' texts using a critical paradigm. The critical paradigm problematises the notion that individuals such as teachers operate free of the political influence and regards the various ways in which people view the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, and the concept of truth as highly contestable subjective acts. The study sought to understand how teachers conceptualised social justice education and how these understandings were deployed as a conduit to broaden access to and in the curriculum.

Selection of participants

This paper uses data from a sample of 20 teachers completing their final year of their ACE: Values and Human Rights in Education. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants from a group of 150 students. Selected participants were students who had obtained a result of more than 60% in the module Social Equity in Professional Practice, which is a final-year second-semester module that introduces students to self-reflexive action research. Purposive sampling is in keeping with Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2000) understanding that participants are selected because they meet particular criteria as determined by the researcher. For our purposes, the motive for using purposeful sampling was to be able to access participants whom we believed had demonstrated sufficient, critical and in-depth knowledge of reflexivity which could have influenced their practice positively.

All participants were primary school teachers who had completed their National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and did not possess a university degree. Participants taught in a range of schools in the province of KwaZulu-Natal; 16 out of the 20 participants taught in rural contexts. Three out of the 20 participants were male. It is important to indicate that only six students in the whole class were male. So, three constituted 50% of the male students. This is normal for our specialisation, because the number of male students has always been significantly lower than that of female students.

In order to ensure that students were not telling us what they thought we wanted to hear, we built in five sessions for students to meet with their respective tutors in their tutorial group to interrogate each student's report with regard to processes followed and emerging understandings. The sessions were meant to assist students to progressively develop their papers based on the input that they were receiving from the group. Students were required to keep a journal of their reflections and learnings. In addition, it was made clear to students that they had to frame their work around the curriculum challenges that they were currently experiencing with the learners whom they were teaching at the time. The intention was to reduce the

influence of the focus on marks, although we know that it could not be completely eliminated because it all eventually boiled down to a mark.

There are many complexities involved in the use of reports intended for assessment for a study such as this one. Thus, we acknowledge the possibility of a bias that could have been present in the reports and that students might have presented reports in keeping with their beliefs of what their tutors wanted, as well as the need to position themselves as teachers working for social justice. Thus, there might be a presentation of an ideal teacher as opposed to what actually occurred in their practice.

Data generation

Data were generated from self-reflexive action reports that students had submitted as part of their programme assessment requirements. The purpose of the self-reflexive action research projects was for students to use theoretical and conceptual knowledge gained over the three semesters to inform their practice in a meaningful, more socially just way. Students had to identify a curriculum issue affecting learning and teaching in their contexts, and design and carry out an intervention programme using critical self-reflexive action research. Central to the action research was the imperative for students to be self-reflexive, that is, to engage in an 'inquiry by the self for the self' (McNiff, 2002:4). Participants were required to develop a self-reflexive kind of consciousness of their own practice. They had to challenge and question their particular value systems that might have had a negative impact on learners' progress in their classroom and then work towards a more just, democratic praxis in broadening access to and in the curriculum. In so doing, they had to acknowledge the need to own the problem and become responsible and accountable for changing oppressive practices that presented as barriers to maximum access to and in the curriculum (Noffke & Somekh, 2011; Creswell, 2008). Excerpts used in this paper were taken directly from students' self-reflexive action reports and form the basis for our argument on the deployment of social justice as a conduit for broadening access to and in the curriculum.

Data analysis

The reports were analysed using a thematic approach. Initial coding involved broad categories of issues that emerged from the data that were divided into meaningful units for analysis purposes. Coding was done both inductively and deductively in that particular understandings emerged from the data which were coded in particular ways. This is also referred to as emic coding which is a representation of the participants' actions, explanations, conceptualisations that are distinct to their contexts. Etic or priori categories or codes represented our researchers' worldviews and understandings based on the literature and experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). We used theoretical constructs to identify emerging themes that would address our research questions.

Ethical considerations

All participants were requested to provide and sign consent forms for the use of their reports for this particular research study. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms for participants and any other potentially identifying information in the reports.

Presentation of findings

The meaning of social justice and education

The data revealed that participants had constructed particular conceptualisations of social justice and education. For them, education was more than an academic endeavour. It involved the understanding that education and teaching was a political act, and that whatever they did or felt in the classroom had far-reaching implications for the future endeavours of their learners. Understanding the lives of, firstly, themselves as teachers, then the lives of their learners, the curriculum and the school as an institution itself, played a vital role in assisting them to frame and adapt their teaching and learning processes in order to make it relevant to the contexts in which they taught. For instance, one of the participants, Nomusa, made this synoptic comment with regard to the essence of the act of educating:

I do not focus only on my learners academic performance I also strive to give them affection and understanding. This ensures that they are emotionally prepared to handle subject related issues such as knowing their multiplication tables in Mathematics, their spelling in English.

A better understanding of the process of teaching and learning required that participants first engage in an intense process of self-reflection, which was, for some, emotionally engaging and personally challenging (O'Connor, 2008). All the participants recognised teaching and learning as more than the mere teaching of academic content. Part of the self-reflexive process that teachers engaged with entailed their valuing all those involved in the educative process. This, in turn, enabled them to negotiate and sometimes challenge what they believed negated this valuing of learners and their ability. It formed part of their identification of what 'a good and supportive teacher did' and enabled them to regain the necessary energy in order for schools to do what they are supposed to do, namely to 'teach and not tolerate issues like laziness, drunkenness'. It meant 'challenging the things that the teachers in my school do and even what the school practices are'(Pearl).

Findings from the project are reminiscent of findings by other researchers, such as MacLure, (1993) and Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002), who indicated that teachers will use their political belief systems as a motivation and justification for their particular ways of engaging with their professional work. This understanding of access to and in the curriculum ensured that participants worked hard to ensure that learners were learning their academics, for if they failed to do this, it would mean that:

... (the) lives of our children would be lost and destroyed ... as at the end learners have to pass Mathematics, Natural Sciences, IsiZulu, English and so on ... it is ultimately about symbols and marks (Sizwe).

Contrary to dominant understanding of teaching and learning, participants viewed education as education for transformation, which was underpinned by the value of action. However, their understanding of the purpose of education was varied, a mixture of neoliberalism and human rights. The participants often vacillated between two understandings, namely the need for structural change and a devolution of power (human rights discourse), but they still recognised that one had to be realistic when dealing with contexts (neoliberalism).

Questions need to be answered ... these include what the purpose of the system is, what are the affected people's beliefs about education, what does learning and teaching mean, why should we teach in a particular way ... Communities send children to schools because they want to improve their situation. They want learners to become engineers, teachers, and accountants and so on. This means that teachers have to teach well in order to meet these needs (Jane).

For these participants, education has far-reaching consequences and many beneficiaries, namely the teachers themselves, learners, learners' families, teachers' families and the community at large. Thus, for most participants, education was about survival and, therefore, skilling learners to be able to actively take part in the economy:

Education is not a luxury it is what breaks the cycle of poverty, victimhood and hegemony. So, it must be good and of high quality. The system must perform well (Busisiwe)

We must teach them now so that tomorrow we will find them ready and well prepared to face life. They must do well in school so that they would be able to have good jobs that pay well (Zama).

It is my belief that everybody should be able to read and write and count ... Is it not the function of the school to provide quality education for all? (Nokwanda)

From this perspective, we are able to conclude that participants were very aware of what, for them, were real purposes of education, and they were aware of the problems facing the majority of South Africans. It was clear that participants had found a necessary balance between understanding the reality of the South African context and the dominant understandings of the purpose of education.

Constructing alternative philosophies of education

Academic views of teaching should highlight and problematise intersections of education and power. Participants in this study argued that, where there were inequities in their schooling context, mostly as a result of dominant practices and beliefs about learners from a particular class, there would be a need for teachers to step in and provide both academic access and pastoral care. Participants further struggled to decide how to provide both access to learning and access to social and

economic support. For instance, one of the participants, Noluthando, painted the dilemma as follows:

When I finished studying from college, I was eager to use all the good things that I had learned there. However, on my first month of teaching, the reaction of my colleagues to simple things such as using teaching aids, taught me that what I had learned from college had no place here. I knew it was the right thing but, being new, I did not have the courage to push this agenda ...It is only now that I have the courage to experiment with various ways of ensuring that learners do well in the subjects that I teach ...

Nancy Frazer's (1997, cited in Rizvi, (2009) conceptual framework of social justice as recognition was important in this regard. It showed teachers' responsive practices following an understanding of what learners required of them as their teachers. Kathy, for example, understood 'her personal beliefs, attitudes and behaviour conformed to that of a traditional teacher,' which she felt discriminated against her English second language learners. This is not to say that teachers were not aware of their context, but rather that the context was used as an exclusionary tool to continue their practices of inequality and oppression. The exclusionary practices of the institution where Zethu taught, for example, promoted the idea of 'you need to be the boss in your classroom,' reinforcing these practices of alienation and marginalisation.

Key to their transformative thinking was being critically aware of the social injustice that the vast majority of learners are exposed to daily (Tickly & Dachi, 2009). Teachers explained in their action research self-reflexive projects that learners in their classroom displayed poor language and maths ability, discipline problems, drug and substance abuse, learning difficulties, or poor vocabulary. Because this project called on them to change their own practice, they needed to focus inwardly and assess the extent to which they were contributors to the difficulties that learners faced but, more importantly, focus on how to change their practice to help learners.

This kind of transformative thinking was based on a critical awareness of political and cultural assumptions and understandings that have an impact on how participants viewed themselves and their relationships with learners. This, in turn, led to a more inclusive understanding of the impact that their practice and experience had on the choices they made on how to deal with the challenge of broadening curriculum access. These were multiple, varied and contradictory at times, reflecting their attempts to construct and reconstruct an identity that they felt was in keeping with social justice thinking and activism (Mezirow, 1981). For instance, participants were conscious of the unequal power dynamics that featured in their relationship with their learners, and that teaching for social justice called for something more than a mere rhetoric. Zodwa's reflection reveals her realisation that incompetent teachers could make it difficult for learners to gain maximum benefit from teaching and learning situations:

I have learned that sometimes it is me as an educator that is blocking a child to learn. As teachers, we often do this when we do not prepare our lessons well, assess in ways that do not take account of the diversity of our learners, have adequate subject knowledge, or do not cover the required amount of work ...

Sithobile's concerns are even greater because here she presents a dilemma about what she believes teaching has been reduced to. For her it is no longer about '(caring) much about other people,' but more about 'working to get an income, not for change and development. I am therefore concerned with what I see because it violates principles of social justice, as learners' time has been and is being wasted ...' Foremost in her mind is that learners' time has been 'wasted' and this means that learners have not had access to opportunities that develop their full academic capabilities. Her concern is also an expression of understanding that teachers are socially responsible for learners and broader society (Bell, 1997)

Constructing alternative philosophies of education often called upon participants to be critically aware of their practice in ensuring the provision of empowering opportunities to learn. Thus, constructing an alternative philosophy of education constituted a political act that wrestled with issues of power. For these participants, construction was a messy, disconcerting process that involved navigating contradictions and controversies. This meant reconstructing their sense of identity or subjectivity with its historical roots steeped in inequality.

For these participants the responsibility of challenging inequality and injustice lies with them as they acknowledge themselves as critical educators working for social justice. For Precious, this starts with the recognition that she 'cannot ride the blaming horse'. Part of being a critical educator is taking responsibility for own practices and being accountable for the results of learners. This implied not shifting the blame for poor results on previous teachers, large numbers, own lack of disciplinary knowledge, a lack of departmental support or learners' demotivation. Instead, it was about their reflection on their own practices and then acting in new and alternative ways. However, it is important to acknowledge that some of these issues are indeed structural deficiencies which require the intervention of the Department of Education.

For participants, constructing alternative philosophies of education called upon teachers to be transformative and future oriented despite the fact that conscientisation is arduous and painful. The challenges that exist in education for many of their learners must be taken seriously and acted upon. This means holding up the ideal that education can and should be geared towards helping every single individual to enjoy their full capabilities (Ayers, Quinn & Stovall, 2009).

The importance of providing quality education

The understanding that education has an impact on people in various ways provided participants with a reason to continue working towards quality education for all

learners. Working for quality education meant that they had to question what they were doing, and why they were doing things in those particular ways. Here, the renewed understandings of their roles as teachers, with regard to providing access to and in quality education, instilled in participants the will to question their previously held assumptions. This allowed them space to begin a process of facilitating teaching and learning in ways that are more inclusive, non-discriminating and self-reflective (Mezirow, 1997). One of the participants, Khumbulani, reflects on the above as follows:

I have to bring hope to the hopeless, justice and treat learners with passion and love. I have to restore their dignity so that they can gain self-esteem and confidence. Restoring their dignity means ensuring that I present the curriculum in ways that make it possible for them to succeed.

The low levels of performance in schools has been a major national concern for the past decade (e.g., African National Congress, 2011, 2012; Department of Basic Education, 2011; Gustafsson & Patel, 2008; Jansen, 2012; Motshekga, 2011; University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010). As educators in South Africa, participants were also concerned about the fact that South African education continued to present as a major source of socio-cultural advantage and disadvantage (Lam, 2007). This is how one of the participants, Langelihle, put forth their concern with regard to the imperative of quality education:

Is it not the function of the school to provide quality education for all? If it is, then I have a responsibility to make sure that my learners do not only enjoy being at school, but that they also do well in literacy, numeracy and life skills ... [E]ducation is about going back home with good results, that can take you to the next level of life.

The above reveals, among other things, that the work of these educators was about addressing specific curriculum issues in order to ensure quality education for their learners. Improving learner performance was viewed as a way to ensure quality education.

A concluding note

A few cautious conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study. First, it would seem that participation in a social justice education specialisation, and doing this kind of project, opened a space for participants to develop a new frame of reference from which to view the world and their teaching. Participants understood that teaching for social justice was about meeting both the academic and social and emotional needs of learners. This came after intense self-reflection and a realisation that teaching is not a neutral act, but a political act endowed with the potential to both exclude and include. The crucial role that teachers play in this process was highlighted. Secondly, findings revealed that becoming a social justice teacher is both a process and a goal (Adams et al., 1997). That is, it is not a once-off event that can be achieved overnight. Instead, it involves developing a personal philosophy of education that is in line with the process and goal of social justice in meeting the needs of learners in context.

Lastly, social justice could be deployed as a conduit to broaden access to and in the curriculum. That is, social justice teachers are obliged to teach in ways that broaden curriculum access for all learners.

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