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ARE WE ALL SITTING UNCOMFORTABLY? UNLEARNING THE STORIES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

JEN SIMPSON

Abstract: Social justice is a widely used term across many sectors, societies, and ideologies and has become a buzzword for positive intentions towards tackling inequity or inequality (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2023). However, it is also a slippery concept which could be easily misinterpreted, or the complexities lost in the effort to respond, ultimately leading people to lose ‘sight of the big picture and the injustice that prevails’ (Ladson-Billings, 2023: 3). Equitable education systems are fundamental and potentially powerful vehicles to achieve a socially just world (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019) though this article questions the validity of any such claims of our current schooling in the United Kingdom (UK) and draws together argumentation for authentic change.

The article explores the multifaceted, sometimes misinterpreted, concepts and realities of social justice specifically within educational contexts and the implications for authentic action and change in these spaces. It will re-visit, re-evaluate and further investigate the potential of ‘discomfort’ as a catalyst for change within educator professional learning which aims at transformation of the status quo. Adding to this discourse is the consideration of emotion within this learning process and the innovative power of humour to humanise and engage with challenging issues. Drawing on current literature and reflecting back to my previous work, this article aims to dare myself, and others in the field, to personally rediscover discomfort as a powerful means for transformative change and engender authentic action.

Key words: Social Justice Mentality; Discomfort; Pedagogy; Transformative Professional Development; Equity.

Introduction

Social Justice is a slippery concept which can be easily misrepresented or enacted by both individuals and society. However, with countries experiencing a growing

political and social divergence and increasing socio-economic gaps the calls for fundamental social justice have been amplified (Bourn, 2021; Blum and Hunt, 2023). Indeed, in the UK there is an ongoing and urgent call for an authentic examination of social justice in relation to schooling (Gandolfi and Mills, 2023; Ball and Collet-Sabe, 2021), and to question the reality of UK governments' commitment to social justice beyond political rhetoric.

After seven years, one global pandemic, four British Prime Ministers and eight Education Ministers (at the time of writing), two general elections, ongoing international conflicts and protests for social justice in the UK, this article will revisit and extend the central discussions of my article for Issue 25 of *Policy and Practice* (Simpson, 2017). The article challenged the misinterpretation of charity mentality as social justice and explored the potential of a new approach to re-framing understandings of and action for social justice in educational contexts. This article will reflect further on the 'potential of discomfort' as a realistic means to engender action or change against the backdrop of an education sector, in a post-pandemic world, where educators are over-worked and with an ever-growing range of responsibilities beyond teaching for which they are held accountable. To engage these educators in challenging professional development which actively undermines fundamental assumptions about their role in social injustice, seems almost impossible or even cruel. However, by drawing on a range of literature this article will explore its potential and reason why it is still necessary to drive forward social justice, not just for educators but for us, as global education practitioners also.

The tale of two concepts – social justice and charity mentality

The concept of justice is one which has been well explored and debated over time with early written evidence originating from ancient Greek philosophies which implies justice as moral conduct or as Plato's *The Republic* (1955) argues either a 'virtue or knowledge' (see Atkins and Duckworth, 2019: 20). Aristotle described the 'moral state' as an individual balance between knowing what is just and acting justly for the benefit of all, which leads to social justice (Ibid.: 20). This description is similar to that held by other world philosophies and global religions which also promote a general sense of moral responsibility for 'charitable giving and advocacy on the part of the poor' (Ibid.: 21) and others in the community.

Modern framings of social justice draw on these foundations though often incorporate other virtues such as participation, democracy, equality and fairness for both the benefit of the individual and society (see Akta , 2021: 3-4). These multifaceted notions of social justice feature across our law making, social consciousness and educational aims and values (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019: 22). On the surface this sense of the ‘common good’ as social justice is simple and positive, however, on greater scrutiny, its meaning is still ambiguous, and its interpretation can differ across sectors of society or discipline (Ibid.: 3). In fact, I would suggest that, in many situations, social justice has been prey to historical misrepresentation or appropriation as a predominantly charitable or moral endeavour and that this ideology does not adequately represent the true nature or potential of social justice. Instead, it better represents a charity mentality approach to social action embodied by the reactionary ‘impulse to help’ those less fortunate without critically engaging in the reasons behind the injustice that necessitates the need nor reflect on our role within that injustice (Bryan, 2013: 1).

The arguments against a charitable or philanthropic approach to social justice can be drawn as far back as J S Mill in the 1860s who reasoned against the forms of what Zembylas (2021) describes as ‘sentimental kindness’ (in Blum et al., 2021: 775) rather than educating understanding of the fundamental causes of poverty or injustice. The avoidance of critical self and social reflection has enabled societies, especially those in the global North, the privilege of ‘sanctioned ignorance’ (Andreotti, 2006: 44). Where a predominate discourse of sentimentality (Blum et al., 2021), attractively re-packaged for modern audiences via ‘Children in Need’ or ‘Live Aid’, perpetuates the mythology of pity for the oppressed and passivity of the ‘saviour’ whose position of privilege actively relies on the continuation of marginalisation and injustice. This dynamic ensures the preservation of a colonial conceptualisation of the world, a metaphorical ‘smokescreen’ which prevents critical engagement whilst perpetuating this ‘myth’ of the powerful ‘North’ as responsible ‘good guys’ (Simpson, 2017). Furthermore, I would argue that this ‘othering’ is not limited to the global, indeed a charity mentality can negatively influence our perceptions of the ‘other’ within our own society, local community and even our classrooms.

At this point, I would offer a potential alternative framing for social justice, specifically in education, which attempts to embody the commonalities of other definitions whilst anchoring it in context as a pedagogy. A social justice *mentality* is a practice in critical thinking and questioning rooted in a commitment to equity which results in ethical action and challenges the status quo. This aligns with Griffiths' (2003) assertion that social justice is a verb with the 'imperative for action...to enact...and be doing social justice' (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019: 41). Its very existence in the lexicon is dynamic, in order to actively respond to current contexts, individual and collective needs to achieve equity. This resonates with the notion that social justice is less a theory and more of a journey without a complete map and therefore subject to change (Ibid.: 36). Similarly, pedagogy is reflexive and, when utilised effectively, can challenge injustices and enable personal and social change.

Socially just education – a tall tale?

Education freedom fighters like Paulo Freire believed that education could affect social change by 'giving voice to the voiceless, and power to those considered disposable' but that it had to take risks and engage in the 'struggle' against neoliberalism, capitalism and authoritarianism (Giroux, 2021: 115-116). Biddulph (2021: 220) highlights the negative impact of neoliberalism on the running of schools where 'children are commodities. Teachers are factory workers' as schools become increasingly marketised with intensified pressure for performativity to policy over professional autonomy. This shift to an 'accountability agenda' (Ibid.: 222) restricts educators' ability to enact their own professionalism; to question authority, and themselves, and act based on their own experience, knowledge or skills. Thus, ultimately limiting the democratic and emancipatory potential of education (Biesta, 2017).

Additionally, Atkins and Duckworth (2019: 23) argue that the normalisation of neoliberal social frameworks has created a social construct of individuals as either a benefit or deficit to society. This dichotomy replicates the charitable giving or action for the 'deficient' as the norm without considering the 'existence of systemic and structural failures which confine people...constrain individual agency and replicate social class and other social inequities' (Atkins, 2009: 144). Indeed, there is an imperative to highlight the role of historic, and

current, social systems that perpetuate inequitable practices and ensure the continuation of discrimination. This includes education and formal schooling which may, unwittingly, embody these practices and actually be a fundamental part of the problem (Towers and Maguire, 2023: 19). Freire (1970) introduced the argument against the ‘banking model’ of teaching which enables education systems to systematically oppress students by replicating knowledge and worldviews designed by their oppressors (Gillett-Swan and Brodie-McKenzie, 2023: 228).

Atkins and Duckworth (2019: 6) highlight the influence of an English school system constructed to differentiate by social class whilst, for some Asian or African contexts, schools impose ‘cultural or societal norms’ which limit access to an (equal) education for some groups. These structures ensure a fundamentally inequitable education system globally, nationally and locally (Stuart 2022: 342) regardless of the rhetoric generated around ‘universal’ access to education as equality. Indeed, the concept of ‘equality’ is regularly woven into the social justice narrative though, I agree with Atkins and Duckworth (2019) on the need to move away from basic interpretations of equality as ‘sameness’ for whose sameness are we replicating? We should be wary of how ‘sameness’ is recognised or represented to avoid a ‘worlding the world as the West’ (Spivak, 1990 cited in Andreotti, 2006: 69) or placing views of the privileged above those of a wider, multilayered society. Instead, we should embrace the deeper and more complex ideologies of fairness and equity which are inseparable to social justice (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019).

Equitable education is underpinned by authentic social justice and therefore requires, as suggested by Nancy Fraser (2008), the three R’s (cultural) Recognition and (political) Representation alongside (economic) Redistribution as an ideal. It could be argued that until young people are *recognised* as ‘key stakeholders in the learning process’ (Ferguson, Hanreddy, and Draxton, 2011: 57) and able to *represent* themselves within the system there cannot be a truly socially just education system. Furthermore, in England, economic disparities reveal themselves through varied educational achievements and so-called ‘quality grading’ by Ofsted which seem entrenched and beyond simple *redistribution* which further supports the claim by Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021) that education

in England is systematically unjust. A system that has been repeatedly promoted as a 'sensible and necessary building block of modern life' rather than acknowledging it for what it is: 'badly designed and processual unfair' (Ibid.: 2).

As argued previously, the foundations of formal education were not built on the ideal of equity but created and framed by colonial and imperialistic values based on notions of 'sameness' in relation to those in 'power'. Moreover, Towers and Maguire (2023) argue that educators, and those who have engaged in formal schooling, have become institutionalised to the concept and processes of school effectiveness or the 'common sense strategies' utilised in schools such as testing or streaming (Ball and Collet-Sabe, 2021 in Ibid.: 18). Therefore, society maintains narrow parameters of criticality and questioning which enable the system to remain with minimal 'tweaks'. Monbiot (2018) suggests this is a result of a lack of alternatives to neoliberalism to engender change with Ledwith (2020) calling for the creation of new narratives and ideas to create novel, more socially just, education systems (see Walton, 2021: 518).

Whilst we wait to generate or find out more about these new narratives it is imperative to continue to find avenues and opportunities to further enhance authentic social justice where possible. Making distinctions between education for social justice and socially just education is significant here. It enables practitioners, researchers and policymakers to clarify their roles and responsibilities in driving changes (Akta , 2021; Atkins and Duckworth, 2019). This article positions education for social justice as the content and knowledge made explicit within a curriculum whilst socially just education as more implicit in nature and demonstrated through the ethos or pedagogy of the practitioner, or institution (Akta , 2021).

A key opportunity for education for social justice should be via the curriculum though Manyukhina (2022) challenges the current conceptualisation and design of the national curriculum for England which is not only prescriptive but lacks the capacity to develop an innate sense of learner agency. Instead, children are passive players of a curriculum which holds immense cultural capital and politically selected knowledge and reflects the 'interest of those in power' (Young, 2003: 554). This potential imbalance or prioritisation of certain

knowledge can favour certain groups or individuals and mirrors the practices inherent in colonisation and marginalisation which ultimately restricts wider social or knowledge development (hooks, 2009). Arguably, it is another example of a ‘smokescreen’ colonial framing of the world or non-critical charity mentality approach to curriculum making (Simpson, 2017).

Through a lack of authentic agency, broad curricula or opportunities to see the world differently, educational structures ‘reproduce marginalization’ (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019: 23) rather than act as an emancipatory or revolutionary vehicle for society. Teacher agency is also significant within this dynamic with evidence suggesting a new policy of re-positioning educators from enactors of policy to ‘agents of change in curriculum making’ (Priestly et al., 2019 in Biddulph, 2021: 222). However, teachers, as with all post-education adults, are a production of systemically inequitable structures built on foundations of social injustice and we must acknowledge the implications that has on their perception of education and ability to design and deliver a curriculum with authentic social justice at its core. Akta (2021) also questions the reality of creating and maintaining a socially just education which is highly dependent on the mentality and critical understanding of leaders within institutions, their fundamental ethos and how they support practitioners or learners to embody the principles and practices of social justice. If we aspire for fundamental change in and across education, whether in terms of curriculum, attitudes or leadership there is one approach which stands out as a potentially powerful conduit: professional learning.

Transforming the story of professional learning

There has been a ‘professionalising’ of professional development or learning (PDL) over the past few years in response to the drive for ‘developing high quality teaching’ to ‘narrow the disadvantage gap’ (EEF, 2021: 4). There is little argument against the logic of effective PDL and its impact on pupil outcomes or learning experiences though arguably there are issues around a generally data-driven, prescriptive or narrow-focused programme of development for practitioners and leaders. The same issues around the power dynamics and privileged viewpoints of curriculum-making can be made here. In addition, with school budgets reducing, PDL spending has dropped by 40 per cent since 2018 (Weston, 2022),

leaders and institutions must make difficult choices about where to spend their tightening finances to meet the accountability agenda set by Ofsted and DfE. Subsequently, interest in challenging and complex concepts such as social justice as PDL is likely to be overlooked in favour of subject-specific knowledge and classroom instruction (Teacher Tapp, 2024: 3, 12; Cordingley et al., 2018) or diluted into compliance issues such as safeguarding or challenging disadvantage. Indeed, literature suggests that opportunities for educators to engage in the concept of social justice during either ITE programmes or professional development are ‘generally inexistent or very superficial’ (Gandolfi and Mills, 2023: 575). That is not to say that there are no examples of social justice PDL widely available, which are well-designed or professionally delivered, but that it remains an add-on to the core educational offer, misunderstood as implicit in other agendas or perceived as too risky in light of DfE’s ‘political impartiality’ requirements (DfE, 2022).

Additionally, measuring the impact of PDL has been variable and only more recently linked to pupils’ learning experiences and outcomes rather than teacher practices (Cordingley and Hughes, 2021). The EEF Effective Professional Development guidance (2021) has notably raised the profile of PDL in terms of developing higher quality teaching and identified ‘mechanisms’ which make it potentially more effective. This is important for those delivering PDL with or for educators, as Jordao (2004: 22) suggests they are ‘especially resistant to change’ as a result of the development of habitual behaviours to which teachers are particularly prone (Webb and Sheeran, 2006). Sims et al. (2021) associate the nature of classrooms as stable environments with both repetitive and stressful aspects of the job which combine to build and reinforce habit formation and contribute to the ‘knowing-doing gap’ or limited impacts of PDL (Simpson, 2022: 13).

In response to these challenges, my previous research explored the efficacy of a transformative learning approach to PDL inspired by Jan Fook (2006) named the ‘learning to unlearn’ framework (Simpson, 2017). The design aimed to initiate an individualised process of critical reflection which actively encourages the educator to challenge deeply engrained assumptions of the world or ‘difficult knowledge’ (Britzman, 1998). This process of ‘unlearning’ engaged participants

in personal conflict in order to initiate a shift in their personal perspectives of the world and subsequently influence professional practice. This dynamic relationship between the personal and professional is a key aspect of PDL for transformation as each influence the others' understandings and practices (Khazem, 2018; Simpson, 2022, 2023). I acknowledge that the process can be challenging and uncomfortable for the participant, however, if we aim for true transformation towards an authentic social justice mentality, then discomfort is not only a natural part of the process but also a necessary one (Illeris, 2003; Zembylas, 2015; Simpson, 2022, 2023). Indeed, Béres and Fook (2020) highlight the emotional or responsive risks resulting from the critical reflection process; a process which make our ideas, values or concepts of the world vulnerable to question or challenge which as a result, risks disputing the foundations of our identity or ideologies. Yet, Freire challenged us, as educators and citizens to take risks, however, inconvenient the consequences (Giroux, 2021: 116). Cordingley et al. (2015: 6) identified the effectiveness of PDL which can 'challenge existing theories in a non-threatening way'; however, can we truly challenge ourselves whilst maintaining our own sense of comfort?

The parable of the potential of discomfort

The pedagogy of discomfort has been explored as a vehicle to engage in social justice education for the past few decades (Zembylas, 2015: 163) and described as a means to 'unsettle cherished beliefs about the world' and 'examine constructed self-images' (Ibid.: 163, 165). Similar to the intentions of the learning to unlearn framework (Simpson, 2017), this pedagogy takes participants out of their comfort zones to spaces of personal challenge, which could be considered somewhat threatening, especially when questioning individuals' privileged assumptions about the world and their role in it (Boler, 1999: 176 in Zembylas, 2015: 163). Equally, marginalised voices require support in these spaces to avoid the polarising positions of domination by more privileged views or incarnation as a vox populi (voice of the people). This poses a question for PDL practitioners and educators: is it possible to create ethically sound, 'safe', learning spaces to explore difficult knowledge or complex social issues and maintain a sense of comfort?

Firstly, the concept of 'safe spaces' for dialogue is one which is fundamentally flawed and predicated on the principles of privilege and power

(Zembylas, 2015; Chetty, 2018). Classrooms are especially influenced by power relations between teachers and pupils with additional complex dynamics between marginalised and privileged students which cannot be ‘sanitized’ into safety (Boler, 2004 in Zembylas, 2015: 165). Moreover, if we aim for transformation of beliefs, perceptions or practices we must acknowledge that this is unlikely without disruption or discomfort as spaces which are too ‘safe’ may lead to apolitical or non-critical ‘chat’ (Bullivant, 2020). As educators we must ‘let go of the desire for consensus as an ultimate goal’ (Newell-Jones and Colbourne, 2006: 17) and recognise that the world is ‘known, interpreted and experienced differently by different people’ (Khazem, 2018: 129). Without embracing the dissenting voices or engaging with those we do not agree with we can create what Chetty (2018) describes as a ‘pedagogy of politeness’ which enables the continuation of the status quo (see Drane and Higham, 2023: 172). Instead, we need *braver* spaces which embrace disagreement and challenge as essential parts of being a critically active and socially just citizen.

Secondly, it is important to remember that PDL practitioners merely create the brave spaces or opportunities for participants to explore their own discomfort, we do not ‘cause it’ (Blum et al., 2021: 767). Interestingly, this resonates with the criticisms levelled at my learning to unlearn approach to PDL and my own urge to apologise to participants for ‘freaking them out’ (Simpson, 2017: 95). Conceptually and professionally, I understood the design of the framework and the need for discomfort though, on a personal level, even I found myself uncomfortable placing educators in spaces of personal challenge. That being said, it is worth highlighting that, discomfort was utilised as only one stage in the learning to unlearn framework and the provocation was selected for its humorous angle. The injection of levity was a purposeful tactic as a powerful driver to subtly unsettle or disrupt accepted norms whilst diffusing the tensions through laughter. Research suggests that humour or dark comedy can provide a distinctly humanising and collective experience which holds intrinsic educational benefits (Zembylas, 2018: 303; Sachs and Dunbar, 2023). It can also inject ‘activation energy’ to depressive and difficult topics (Sachs and Dunbar, 2023) and boost morale and the capacity for inspiring ‘novel thinking about emotionally difficult situations’ (Zembylas, 2018: 305).

The emotionally charged nature of this work could be considered both a barrier or driver and perceptions of emotion within education and society is significant here. Ojala (2021: 42-43) highlights the tendency of neoliberal societies to reject negative feelings as counterproductive to the ‘grand plan’ of economic order. Additionally, the general privatisation of life in a neoliberal society has resulted in emotions viewed as more of an individual problem and responsibility (Ibid.: 43) which promotes those who can regulate emotions or comply with the dominant emotional hierarchy, what has been referred to as emotional imperialism (Zembylas, 2024).

Furthermore, a small-scale study by Ojala (2021: 44) indicated that, educators generally ‘disapprove of emotions as part of the learning process’. Interestingly, participants indicated value differences between emotions such as guilt, sadness or worry which were seen as significantly negative whilst feelings of anger or frustration, though also negative, were perceived as having more educational potential and motivational value (Ibid.: 45). Conversely, however, research indicates that worry can actually be a positive driver and linked to ‘engagement and high self-efficacy’ (see Ojala, 2021: 49). An argument to progress between these opposing perspectives would be to acknowledge the potential of emotions when young people, and adults are supported to understand, manage and utilise their emotions *constructively* rather than ‘hiding them under the rug’ in preference to empirical knowledge (see Bauman and Donskis, 2013; Ojala, 2021).

The key word being *constructively* as, similar to the criticisms of a charity mentality approach to social justice issues, the use of emotive reactors to engage with complex social issues is arguably too simplistic. A focus on sentiment or emotional response links to the knee-jerk reactionary impulse to help and can potentially ‘gloss over societal problems’ (Ojala, 2021: 42) rather than engage with a genuine interest in change. Another point of resistance for educators engaging in emotionally engaged learning may be the fear of overstepping the line into the personal rather than professional sphere and therefore shifting the power dynamics within the learning environment. This article has already argued the case for engaging the personal as part of transformative learning though it is worth

emphasising how emotions are integral to the process alongside critical reflection (Blum et al., 2021: 766).

Thus, we can conclude that discomfort, as a process of transformative learning, requires a balance between constructive emotional engagement and critical thinking. Moreover, I would suggest that discomfort is not enough on its own and should be built around a framework which includes a process of re-construction with the purpose of engendering purposeful hope and agency of participants. This is built into the final stages of the learning to unlearn framework which was designed to support the re-framing and action planning to ensure the transformation process occurs in the longer term (Simpson, 2017). Ideally this should be a collaborative exercise to avoid the isolationism of neoliberal approaches and recognise the innate power of collective agency and solidarity in the face of institutional social injustice (see Ojala, 2021: 42; Giroux, 2021).

Conclusion

Education is not neutral, it does not exist in a political, economic nor social vacuum but has been built into the very fabric of modern society (Giroux and França, 2019). Therefore, it is not immune to the influences of neoliberalism or colonialism and there is a growing imperative that this must be acknowledged by educators and society, and we have a responsibility to respond to it. If we aim for a socially just world then we must engage our social justice mentality, dare to see the world differently, more honestly, and prepare to feel uncomfortable with what we see. The picture is not one of equity and, though complex, we all play our own small part within the inequitable systems and structures, especially in education. But there is hope. Education for social justice has the potential to 'nurture hope and optimism for social transformation' (Tarozzi, 2024: 2) and I propose that a critical social justice mentality has the pragmatism, rooted in pedagogy and educational ethos, to drive forward transformation of the dominant narratives and practices to achieve more equitable education systems (Atkins and Duckworth, 2019: 6). What are these next hopeful steps towards making this a reality? Ideally, any future government needs to honestly engage with and effectively enable educators to enact socially just education and explicitly plan for education for social justice. Similarly, we need educational institutions and

leaders to re-think their processes and practices, to root them in authentic social justice and create new strategies and approaches which embody equitable education.

Additionally, we need educators to be braver, to face and explore their vulnerabilities and have agency and criticality to initiate change. We need PDL practitioners to be braver in creating more uncomfortable spaces for unlearning and re-framing knowledge at the risk of participant revolt or apathy. Indeed, my own professional gaze falls upon future research around the potential of humour to explore difficult and uncomfortable issues which may inspire ‘novel thinking’ (Zembylas, 2018: 305) through laughter. Perhaps most significantly, we, as an educational sector, also need to be braver and take a step back to make space for learner agency in this dialogue. By opening up creative spaces for critical thinking and imagining novel or alternative futures we can, together, shift the dominant narratives of power in education to make way to write new ones.

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Jen Simpson is a global learning practitioner and educational researcher with a special interest in social justice, learner agency, participatory research approaches, critical pedagogy, and teacher professional development. She is an experienced project manager and teacher professional development provider with a range of experience in both mainstream education, higher education and NGO sectors. She has undertaken a number of innovative research projects starting with the GLP Innovation Fund in conjunction with the Institute of Education, University College London. More recently working as a research assistant at Durham University and a teaching associate and tutor at the University of Cumbria she continues to explore and engage in innovative participatory educational research and practice. E-mail: thinkingthroughlearning@gmail.com.