

Teachers' Perceptions and Practices/Experiences of Social Justice in Turkey

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Abstract

This article examined teachers' perceptions and experiences of social justice in Turkey. Social justice is defined as inequality in society, including economic inequality, global migration, racism, xenophobia, prejudice against disabled people, and class discrimination. Teachers' perceptions of social justice affects their values, beliefs, awareness, backgrounds, and practices in the classroom. The research design selected was in accordance with maximum variation sampling. Fourteen teachers were recruited and data was collected by conducting semi-structured questionnaire with the teachers. Findings were teachers perceive the concept of social justice in terms of equality, equal rights, justice, discrimination, and human rights.

Keywords: Social justice, Social justice practice, Teachers perceptions

1. Social Justice

The influences of social class, race, gender, class, religious affiliations, culture (Dunaway, McColl & Nichols, 2010; Papa, 2016 as cited in Wilmore & Papa, 2016, p. 199) sexuality, and disability will impact a person for an entire lifetime (Blackmore, 2013). "Dewey's philosophy of socialized learning directly correlates to today's needs regarding social justice education" (Wilmore & Papa, 2016, p. 199). Researchers on social justice have provided varied definitions for social justice and strategies for reducing inequalities (Arar, Beycioğlu & Oplatka, 2016; Zajda, Majhovich & Rust, 2006). 'Social Justice' is defined as "a perception that believes in the responsibility of a society and its institutions to promote economic welfare for all its members" (Mansfield 2013, p. 647). Social justice refers to the overall fairness of a society in its divisions and distributions of rewards and burdens (Zajda, Majhovich & Rust, 2006).

According to Chiu and Walker (2007) social justice is an issue of equalizing and improving opportunities and prospects for the disadvantaged and disaffected, and they clarified that 'disadvantage is often linked to race, ethnicity, culture, social class, gender, family structure, sexual orientation, age, and disability. According to Fujiyoshi (2015), a social justice educator requires not only depth of knowledge and skill in content and instruction but heart, will, passion, and unharnessed determination. The school can play a significant role in leading social change, especially in light of persistent social and academic gaps in society (Arar, 2015; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009, as cited in Arar, Beycioğlu & Oplatka, 2016, p2).

Social justice responds to economic inequalities in society and the rise of militarism, global migration, international human trafficking, racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, prejudice against disabled people, and class discrimination (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2010; Apple, 2004, as cited in Bursa & Ersoy, 2016). According to Bender-Slack and Raupach (2008) there were similarities in the language the teachers used to describe the role of standards in their classrooms, their belief that context was important to the tension between teaching for social justice and to standards, and how that impacted their negotiation of the tension. According to Grennon Brooks & Thompson (2005) when we discourage students from engaging in public conversations about race and social justice, we lose an important component of education.

Bursa and Ersoy (2016) in citing Ayers (1998) and Wade (2004) agreed that teachers in social justice education should accordingly provide students with examples of social injustice in society, as well as activities involving critical thinking, conflict resolution, problem solving, and project production, and encourage students to question the rules of society and their rationales. They should moreover make sure that students' ideas are respected and valued, respect and improve students' individual differences, help students to feel secure, foster their awareness and sensitivity about cultural diversities in social life, and promote their active participation in the classroom, the school, and society.

The Turkish Educational System

The educational system of Turkey is centralized, and the Ministry of Education has the authority to decide and implement any educational policy. It has a hierarchical organizational structure with the Minister at the apex supported by several undersecretaries in the Ministerial Office, the Board of Education and Discipline, main service units, advisory and supervisory units, auxiliary units and the Project Coordination Centre established with the approval of the Minister. The Ministry of National Education has provincial organizations in 81 cities and 850 districts, with a directorate of national education in each province and district. Principals manage schools in collaboration with school-level commissions, teams and councils not only to ensure efficient use of

resources, but also to comply with education laws, regulations and policies (Beycioglu, Sincar, Ozer, Ugurlu, & Yildirim, 2014).

Among studies on social justice, which have gradually expanded during the last decades, research in Turkey on educational policies and with school principals (Polat, 2007; Tomul, 2009; Turhan, 2007) have revealed shortcomings in the treatment of income inequality. For one, while the administrative aspects of social justice have been addressed in these studies, its class-based aspects have remained largely ignored.

The purpose for this research was to understand teachers' perceptions and practices/experiences of social justice in their classroom in Turkey.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How would teachers define social justice?
2. What notions/concepts does social justice include for you?
3. Would you make definitions referring to class and school from general to the specific?
4. What do you think the principles are regarding social justice?
5. Considering your own classroom, would you share your classroom practices and experiences?

1.1 Heading 2

2. METHODOLOGY

The most important advantage of qualitative research is that it enables the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena they are studying (Lindlof, 1995). More specifically, the design of qualitative research, which generally attempts to define participants' experiences and understandings, explored associations between phenomenon and the individuals (Moustakas, 1994).

In terms of social justice teachers' perceptions and classroom experiences were sought. Maximum variation sampling was done to recruit teachers for the study. Teachers were selected according to their professional experience, the socio-economic status of the students they teach, their awareness of social justice, and their educational background. Teachers were recruited from schools of different socio-economic status to form a diverse sample of teachers. The teachers, who varied in terms of professional experience, age and subject, were informed of the study, and volunteers were recruited into the sample. All the teachers were working in the different provinces and schools in İstanbul.

Ultimately, the sample included 14 teachers.

Table 1: Demographic and professional information of participating teachers

Gender	Years as teacher/ Seniority	Subject	Degree earned	Grade	Type of school	Teachers School's SES
Female	17 years	English	Bachelor's	7-8 (Secondary school)	State	Middle-low
Female	7 years	IT	Master Degree	9-10-11 (high school)	Private	Upper
Female	12 years	Elementary	Bachelor's	4	State	Middle-low
Male	21 years	Arts	Master Degree	7-8	State	Middle-low
Female	13 years	Elementary	Master Degree	1	Private	Upper
Male	21 years	Elementary	Bachelor's	4	State	Middle
Male	19 years	IT	Master Degree	9-10	Private	Upper
Male	13 years	Mat	Bachelor's	11-12	Private	Upper
Male	17 years	Literature	Bachelor's	12	State	Upper
Female	8 years	IT	Bachelor's	5-6-7-8	State	Middle
Male	18 years	Special Education	Master Degree	9	State	
Female	14 years	Physical Education	Bachelor's	5-6-7-8	Private	Upper
Female	10 years	IT	Bachelor's	5,8	Private	Upper
Female	11 years	IT	Master Degree	3,4,5,8	Private	Upper

SES = Socioeconomic status

Data was collected by conducting semi-structured questionnaire responses. The data was analyzed inductively obtained from the questionnaire.

3. FINDINGS

Respondents provided clear answers to questions: 1. How would teachers define social justice?; 2. What notions/concepts does social justice include for you?; and, 5. Considering your own classroom, would you share your classroom practices and experiences? They did not specifically respond to questions: 3. Would you make definitions referring to class and school from general to the specific?; and, 4. What do you think the principles are regarding social justice? Some of their responses to questions 1, 2 and 5 could address those raised in questions 3 and 4 though it was difficult to breakout those responses clearly.

Respondents definitions of social justice were broad and in most cases spanned the full spectrum of life, meaning social justice exists in all areas of life. All respondents (n=14) defined social justice as a responsibility of the government and a right for all human beings. Many respondents (n= 5) indicated that there should be systems in place to balance inequities and create opportunities for all children in the schools. Most respondents (n= 9) included equity in pay and access to healthcare as major components of social justice.

Teachers Definitions and Perceptions of Social Justice

Respondents definitions and perceptions of social justice as reported on the survey are noted below using direct quotes from the teachers.

How would teachers define social justice?

Social justice means that every individual has the same privileges and equal rights and this is provided by the government. However, this must include specific and appropriate circumstances for individuals.

In my opinion, social justice must carry the meaning of the term. Social life is organized according to the principles of social justice and it must be interpreted in the same way by everyone. Every individual in the society must embrace it and it must be embraced equally without making discrimination among people from western and eastern parts of the world.

I define social justice as providing the same rights and privileges in the school environment for the students coming from different social classes. Students must have equal privileges so they can forget about the social classes they come from. Teachers must have awareness about social justice while they are giving homework or tasks during the class and dealing with problematic behaviors.

We can define social justice as equalities in the privileges the government provide for its citizens and equalities, which are in use in every part of the society. In our country, we can define social justice as a concept, which is on paper but not in practice. As the relevant institutions, education, healthcare, security...etc. services must be in use and provided by the government in all areas of life that concern people.

We can say that social justice is protecting people who are economically less powerful against classes that are more powerful and taking precautions to eliminate income inequalities among social classes. Social justice in school and class is to provide equal opportunities and rights for each child. Social justice could be applied to all areas of life.

In my opinion, social justice is that people who share the same living environment must have equal rights and no one has different privileges.

Justice is an essential concept for a country. The first thing I can think of is that: Is there justice in our country let alone social justice. Social justice is having the equal opportunities in education, healthcare and career. Moreover, those in power must protect the idea of justice and be fair to the citizens they take services to.

All people in a society must have equal rights and freedoms. There are some institutions, which are founded to organize common life areas, and everyone regardless of differences must follow the rules and people and societies must be governed with a sense of justice.

It is significant to share the resources of the country equally and righteously. Social justice is to protect the rights of people with low-income against those with higher incomes.

What notions/concepts does social justice include for you?

Responses to question 2 were similar to those of question number 1. Equality was stressed again among all respondents. For most equality was important across all aspects of life. Some new language such as awareness, happiness, peace were expressed as aspects of social justice in responses to this question. Language addressing more personal differences was also apparent in these responses.

The principles I can think of are equality, (all kinds of equality...women, men, gay, trans, disabled, children), awareness, justice-based, fairness.

The concepts relevant to social justice are equality, justice, rights, order, happiness and peace.

Social justice includes housing, shelter, employment, education, transportation and communication.

It includes the concepts such as social environment, law, justice, education, and healthcare. We can say that social justice is having equal rights in all areas of life considering the society in general. Considering school environment, we can say that social justice is that students are not discriminated and have the same education regardless of social and personal differences.

Having a balanced standard of living in almost all parts of society could be described as social justice. Breaking this balance could lead to discontent or dissatisfaction in the society. In education sector, the gap and

the imbalances between state and private universities could damage the concept of “social justice”.

I think we need to discuss the concept in detail. Regarding the resources, not only economic situation but also the values, cultural properties, social and political rights and freedoms must be considered. All are equal before the law/constitution. No individuals or classes should be granted a privilege. The concept of social justice must be taken into consideration in determining educational policies along with competition in a globalizing world.

Welfare state is a concept of government in which every individual has equal rights. Before coming to school and class stage, we are dealing with a world in which the right to live as a basic human right is taken from people.

Social justice in my country is having equal opportunities for every child in terms of education. Physical circumstances of the school, the variety of course materials used in school, transportation rights (logistics) and the availability of teacher when needed.

However, if teachers undergo such injustices at the first place, how can teachers teach students the values and the most important concepts for a society? A teacher must be fair to the students without discriminating them in terms of socio-economic status, race, language and religion.

Would you make definitions referring to class and school from general to the specific?

No responses were received (n=0).

What do you think the principles are regarding social justice?

Just one respondent commented about the school principal.

My colleagues and school principal didn't support our class assembly. They joined a few meetings, as they were curious about it with the permission of the students. They did not find it right in terms of time and practicality and they said that it did not apply to their classes. The school administration refused my offer of structuring school administration in the same way. They suggested I use it only in my class.

Considering your own classroom, would you share your classroom practices and experiences?

Responses to question 5 across the board were much more detailed and lengthy and seemed to have more variation among the respondents than in the previous questions. Personal differences expressed in a variety of ways was a theme among most responses. Discussion of gender, religion and ethnicity was more prevalent in these responses than in early responses. Learning style, speed and right intelligence were also addressed by many of the respondents. Challenges around socio-economic situation was also mentioned by several respondents in this question. While all questions were open-ended, it appears that when given the opportunity to discuss social justice in the realm of their own classroom respondents were able to really focus on issues and concerns of social justice.

I am working in a school, which shares my sense of justice. Every activity, planning and social collaboration practices are performed considering the concept of social justice. I feel fortunate about this issue.

Not only in class but also in every area of my life I try to be fair and care about personal differences. I try to discover the right intelligence types and apply methods and techniques accordingly. It could be seen that these kinds of attitudes and behaviors are supported by the administration.

The teacher should not plan the course considering only the academic success of the students. They should build the environment in which their students could grow up as a fairer, more democratic and more social human being. They should give importance to individual education that will improve students' personal characteristics. Teacher must value each student in the same way and guide them according to their social and cultural backgrounds considering their skills and interests.

The institution I am currently working approaches this issue sensitively. The students with low-incomes but have a higher academic performance are given grants/ scholarships. In the same way, the teachers and the personnel's children are given grants. Hence, students from different classes can benefit from the resources of the school.

I try to have a contact with students one by one and fulfill their individual needs considering their personal differences. As I work with teenagers, I try to give support with their personal problems. I try to assign duties and tasks fairly. I avoid imbalances while doing assessment and evaluation. I have the support of school administration and school administrators within the context of IB program.

In the feedbacks I have received from my students so far, students think that I am a fair teacher and I listen to them in any circumstances. For me, student stands in a position independent from all categories or discriminations made by the society. A student is an individual with all the actions, efforts, attitude, in the way they build themselves inside or outside the classroom and this individual has equal rights as I do. All the rules apply to all of us in the classroom. As a teacher, I listen to my students in any circumstances and respect their opinions. I never discriminate anyone because of religious, economic or political reasons. As a teacher, I never label students because of their backgrounds and hold prejudice against any student. Furthermore, in my classes, no students can make fun of others because of any reasons and cannot use offensive or insulting words. In my classes, disrespect to personal rights and interference with private life are not approved.

We have a class assembly, in which students discuss their personal rights, set the agenda for themselves, and manage the process and as a teacher, I am only a participant. We are trying to make student participation more visible.

In visual arts course, there are more course materials compared to other courses. I usually prefer working with waste materials or materials that can be existed in the nature such as stone, branches, cardboard, lids or caps...etc. My students and I organize events that we could earn money for the activities we will do within the context of financial literacy projects. We ask for the support of school administration by giving them information about these events and sometimes parent-teacher association provides these materials.

We are working on school assembly elections with the classes. In fact, this is indirectly related to the concept of social justice. (In the school that I am currently working, social studies department is performing studies about social state or state of law.

Social justice practices in the classroom includes the equality before anyone, the punishments and the rewards I gave, taking every individual's skills and activities into consideration, marking the exams fairly, giving fair assignments and tasks and being fair while giving them a right to speak. Teachers play a very important role in building social justice in education especially in schools. Teachers directly shares education facility with the children. As teachers, we must be fair and have equal distance to any student based on the principle of equality of education. We must not discriminate any social groups, gender or ethnicity.

My field of study is Technology and Design so my students need materials in my course. I keep additional materials in my studio for the students who cannot afford to buy their materials for the course and I give them the materials like card box, glue...etc. without telling other students. I try to choose materials that they can easily get. I suggest that they work using recycling materials. Besides, some of the students' skills and understanding are beyond the others but I do not criticize the students who are not as good as the others. I just give some piece of advice suggesting doing the work in a different way and I give them an extension. Learning speed and skill of each student could be different. I think ignoring different levels of students' abilities can be an example of social injustice. I want them to make a product by cooperating with each other instead of competing. Sometimes, during a conversation, I see that they are embarrassed about some of their characteristics; for example, the number of siblings, hometown, and ethnicity. I have conversations about these issues from time to time.

First, I never discriminate my students in terms of language, religion and race. Although my students need special education (mild mental deficiency), the decisions are taken by majority or unanimity of votes. You need to be fair between the ones with strong deficiency and the mild ones. Sometimes, it is necessary to apply positive discrimination among them.

4. CONCLUSIONS

While respondents most often responded in correlation to literature reviewed, there were several respondents who questioned social justice in Turkey and in their schools as more of a concept versus a practice. While in the literature gender was often identified as a key component of social justice only one respondent talked directly to gender equality. Religion is also cited often in the literature though rarely mentioned from this group of respondents.

Often in the larger world social justice remains a concept not a practice. Responses from respondents indicated a desire and commitment to bring social justice to practice not only in their classrooms but also in their greater communities. Teachers' perceptions about social justice reflect their perceptions about people as well as their approaches to daily life experiences and events in their countries and around the world (Fujiyoshi, 2015). In addition, classrooms can either cultivate social justice and its composite issues appreciating diversity, promoting equity, advancing broad-mindedness, and encouraging voice and expression or they can suppress it (Grennon Brooks & Thompson, 2005).

5.RECOMMENDATIONS

Education is fundamental and universal human right and a key indicator of economic stability and social maturity of nation.

Education should provide the freedom to develop those capabilities that impart a range of options and choices for individuals. For this reason, children need to be educated (Blackmore, 2013, p. 1007).

Education should be equal and fair for every child. The results of this Turkish study indicated that teachers perceive social justice in terms of equality, justice, respect, tolerance, and human rights.

The teachers in the sample characterized individuals with a sense of social justice as people who are respectful of human rights and laws. In a similar way, teachers associated social justice with being equalitarian in their daily relationships and non-discriminatory and the teachers referred to their social experiences as citizens.

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