Chapter 49

Social Justice and Inclusion of Children With Diverse Needs in Mainstream Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter opens with a broad statement that coins the social justice and inclusion as prominent concepts. The foundation is laid by giving a clear background using a South African context where there is a gap between the policy and implementation of social justice and inclusion of children in mainstream schools. This explanation goes further when the social justice, inclusion, and related concepts are conceptualised and the relationship brought forth. The main issues that temper social justice and inclusion in the mainstream schools are debated. Furthermore, there is an engagement regarding practices that hamper social justice and inclusivity of children with diverse needs. Finally, the solutions and recommendations that can be considered in dealing with the issues, controversies, or problems presented in this chapter are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice is a requirement for a democratic society, and so is inclusive schooling. It is a cornerstone of inclusive education because a socially just system of education embraces inclusive schooling. This is highlighted by Nieuwenhuis (2010: 280-283) and Pendlebury and Enslin (2004: 40) when providing the indicators of a socially just system of education. These indicators are also prevalent in inclusive education and points to the interconnectedness between these concepts. These indicators demonstrate that a socially just system of education:

- Excludes no children from access to education. In a social justice context, it respects the equal right to education for all, whereas in the inclusive education context it calls for the increase of access and participation of all the learners in schools that are inclusive.

- Excludes no children from access to learning within schools. In a social justice context, it guards against internal exclusion, whereas in the inclusive education context it propels change in discriminatory attitudes and calls for the creation of welcoming communities and the development of an inclusive society.
- Provides opportunities and support for all children to exercise the range of functions necessary for developing their mature adult capabilities;
- Reduces or, better, abolishes structural forms of oppression that restrict peoples' access to resources and opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities or capabilities for living a decent human life. Without social justice and educational inclusion, groups and individuals are deprived of opportunities for developing those capabilities essential to living a fully human life.
- Takes human agency seriously and enables the self-development and self-determination of all citizens. In social justice as well as in inclusive education, self-development and self-determination are exactly what is required for disadvantaged and marginalised people – such as those living with a disability, those differed in class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and language as well as those from a poverty stricken homes or homeless. These will help them to break out of the cycle of exclusion.

This chapter makes a case for a conception of social justice, inclusion and inclusive education in order to highlight the diverse needs of disadvantaged and marginalised children.

BACKGROUND

School inclusion has been a tool of South African government over the last decade to try to address some of the social injustices that happened particularly during apartheid era and which disadvantaged a large number of learners. The lack of school inclusion has been labelled as affecting both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. The indicators for this exclusion are the lack, or denial of resources, rights, goods, and services. It also involves the inability of the individuals or designated groups to participate in the normal activities available to the majority of the people in a society. This is a concern for social justice as it propagates that people should have sufficient financial and other resources to participate in economic, social, cultural and political life (National Pro Bono Resource Centre, 2011).

Moreover, social justice advocates the creation of fair institutions and institutional frameworks that provide schools that are socially inclusive in such a way that they justly cater, accommodate and support learners with diverse needs. It is about making the systems and structure of society more just, rather than seeking justice in individual cases. This is the main principle of inclusive education which states that it is incorrect to assume that barriers to learning reside primarily within the learner. Therefore, it calls for the shift in focus from individual learner to the entire learning system. It can be said that both social justice and inclusive education advocate the positive intervention of government to tackle structural inequalities or barriers (Department of Education, 2001; The International Forum for Social Development, 2006).

In the general inclusion discourses or school inclusion, in particular, a nexus is shown between inclusive education, human rights, democracy and social justice (National Pro Bono Resource Centre, 2011). The interesting readings on the above concepts propel that the idea of inclusive education provides a useful focus for an account of social justice. This link is also put forth when defining inclusive education as it

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