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Role of School and Teachers in Advancing Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

Social justice has become a central objective in educational policy, teacher preparation, and school practice, yet the term is used so widely that its meaning and practical implications are often unclear. This article brings together a variety of sources of knowledge to examine how schools and teachers can advance social justice. The analysis draws on conceptual mapping of social justice literature, theoretical accounts of critical multicultural education, and qualitative studies of marginalized students and teachers in Indian higher education. Four themes emerge from the thematic analysis: (a) social justice is a contested concept that schools must clearly define; (b) teachers advance justice through relationships, cohesion, and explicit action on inequity; (c) institutions must align policy with practice and support teachers through training; and (d) discomfort, though difficult, is a productive and perhaps necessary part of this work. The article concludes that schools and teachers play mutually complementary roles, and that justice-oriented education requires both structural commitment and thoughtful, caring pedagogy

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INTRODUCTION

Education is widely regarded as a pathway to social mobility, but educational systems can also reproduce the inequalities they are meant to reduce. If a school fails to reduce the inequalities among students they may increase the social challenges rather than removing it (Takshashila et al., 2024). For this reason, researchers in the field of education are increasingly placing social justice at the center of their thinking about what schools are for and what teachers should do. The prominence of the idea is considerable. Social justice is reflected in education policies, school mission statements, teacher education programs, and reform proposals. Yet, in practice, it is not as persistent (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Meanwhile, contemporary societies face technological change, economic crisis, migration, and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which place new demands on schools as institutions that are open to, and shaped by, society (Rentzi, 2024).

This article enquires: What role do schools and teachers play in advancing social justice, and what conditions help them do so? The research paper addresses the question by integrating scholarly research article that approach social justice from different angles: conceptual, theoretical, empirical, and critical-reflective. This article clarifies what social justice means in education, examines the role of schools as institutions, analyzes the role of teachers and their teaching methods, discusses the challenges and tensions involved, and offers implications for practice.

CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

I. *A contested and multi-layered concept*

Social justice encompasses a range of historically constructed and politically contested concepts (Rizvi, 1998, as cited in Hytten & Bettez, 2011). Hytten and Bettez (2011) show how this occurs even within the same institution. Educational institutions and programs that agreed on similar social justice goals differed in how they understood fairness (equal or equal treatment), where they saw change (individual or institutional responsibility), and how they implemented it (changing attitudes or working together).

To understand this diversity, Hytten and Bettez (2011) divide the literature into five sections: “philosophical/conceptual, practical, ethnographic/narrative, theoretically specific, and democratically grounded”. The philosophical section clarifies terms and principles such as distribution, recognition, opportunity, and outcomes, but may seem abstract to practitioners. The practical section provides criteria for the right schools and capable teachers. Narrative work centers human experience. Theoretically specific discourses, such as multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, and cultural studies, offer analytical tools but often

speak primarily to specialists. Democratically grounded work connects justice to the preparation of active citizens. The authors do not propose a single definition; rather, they call for dialogue across sectors so that educators can form alliances.

II. *Forms of equality*

Rentzi (2024) uses Gewirtz's (1998) key points to describe three approaches to equality in education: “equality of opportunity (equal access to social goods like education), equality of outcomes (affirmative or positive-discrimination policies that reduce segregation), and equality of conditions (equal living conditions regardless of gender, nationality, disability, religion, or sexual orientation)”. Rentzi also argues that justice should not be limited to the fair distribution of goods, but should extend to institutional rules and relationships.

Stacey et al. (2025) add nuance to Fraser's interpretation of justice, including redistribution, recognition, and representation, and extensions that consider contributory and effective justice. These shift the focus from what people receive to who is seen, who is heard, who is allowed to work, and how those relationships are experienced. Stacey et al. also emphasize that a stated commitment to justice does not guarantee what justice requires, nor will that actions taken in its name yield the right outcomes. They cite the history of assimilationist schooling for First Nations peoples in Australia as an example of the harm done under the guise of "good education" (Bishop, 2021, as cited in Stacey et al., 2025).

Overall, these sources suggest that schools and teachers cannot simply promote social justice by using the term. They must clearly and collectively define what aspects of justice they are promoting, for whom, and in what way.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS AS INSTITUTIONS

I. *Schools as sites of reproduction and resistance*

Schools are sociocultural institutions embedded in power differentials (Stacey et al., 2025). They can reinforce or challenge discrimination. Writing about health and physical education (HPE), Gerdin et al. (2020) observed that “the subject can privilege or isolate students based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and social class, and can even be unhealthy for some students”. Similarly, Takshashila et al. (2024) reported that students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Indian colleges face stigmatization, isolation, and low expectations, which impact not only academic performance but also their sense of belonging and self-esteem.

Hytten and Bettez (2011) trace a long tradition of educators who see schools as central to democratic life, from Counts's call for teachers to build a new social order to Dewey's participatory vision of democracy. In this tradition, schools are expected to cultivate what Westheimer and Kahne (2004), as cited in Hytten & Bettez, 2011, call *justice-oriented citizens*: people who look for the root causes of social problems rather than treating charity as the main response. In their example, while some citizens donate to food drives and others organize them, justice-oriented citizens ask why people are hungry and act on what they find.

II. *Inclusive and critical multicultural school cultures*

Rentzi (2024) argues that schools are organizations that form the citizens of the future, and that diverse student populations make an inclusive environment essential. Drawing on Kincheloe and Steinberg's (2002) typology, she distinguishes conservative, liberal, pluralistic, and critical multiculturalism. Liberal multiculturalism helps people recognize shared humanity, but critical multiculturalism is presented as more effective in disrupting entrenched power structures, because it questions oppressive systems and policies and highlights structural inequality. In practice, a critical multicultural school redesigns curricula so that they reflect the concerns of every social group, supports collaborative learning in diverse groups, and responds to each student's abilities, interests, and learning needs (Rentzi, 2024).

Hytten and Bettez (2011) likewise report practical models for just schools, including principles such as inclusion and equity, high expectations for all students, reciprocal community relationships, and a system-wide approach. These models show that institutional commitment, rather than isolated individual effort, is needed.

III. *The gap between policy and practice*

Policy alone does not provide justice. In their Indian Higher Education Study, Takshashila et al. (2024) found that there was no difference between inclusion policies like reservations and student experiences. Students reported being left to fend for themselves despite claims of institutional support, and described stigma associated with reservations, including the belief that they were unworthy of their place. Educators involved in the study agreed that supportive policies should be accompanied by robust support systems such as mentorship, peer support, and curriculum reform. This study was small, with six participants deliberately selected, so its results are illustrative rather than generalizable; the percentages reported by the authors should be read with that limitation in mind. Nevertheless, this pattern is similar to

the example of a program by Heighton and Bettez (2011) in which a social justice statement was adopted without discussion of how it would be implemented or who would be responsible.

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS

I. *Teachers' knowledge, dispositions, and competencies*

The practical strand of the literature describes what justice-oriented teachers need to know and do. Hackman (2005), as cited in Hytten & Bettez, 2011 identifies five components: content mastery, tools for critical thinking, tools for social change and activism, tools for personal reflection about power and privilege, and awareness of multicultural group dynamics. Bettez (2008, as cited in Hytten & Bettez, 2011) adds practices such as facilitating critical thinking, discussing power and privilege explicitly, maintaining compassion for students, practising self-care, and building critical communities. Grant and Gillette (2006), as cited in Hytten & Bettez, (2011), emphasise culturally responsive teaching, self-knowledge, and openness to change.

Teachers do not always feel prepared for this work. Gerdin et al. (2020) note that many HPE teachers lack the understanding and pedagogical skills to address social inequities. In the Indian study, two thirds of the professors reported feeling unprepared to lead discussions on caste and inequality, with one stating that they wanted to discuss these issues but lacked the training to do so sensitively (Takshashila et al., 2024).

II. *Building relationships*

Gerdin et al. (2020) studied 13 teachers in Sweden, Norway, and New Zealand who were known for foregrounding social justice. They identified three interrelated themes in their teaching. The first was **relationships**. Teachers learned students' names, families, and everyday circumstances, used positive and caring interactions, and recognised that relationship-building is the teacher's responsibility and takes time. This knowledge informed justice-oriented decisions. For example, one teacher declined to penalise students whose families could not afford a uniform. Gerdin et al. (2020) present relationship-building as a foundation for justice rather than an end in itself; they caution that social justice pedagogy also requires examining and disrupting taken-for-granted practices that create inequity.

III. *Teaching for social cohesion*

The second theme was **teaching for social cohesion**. Teachers deliberately mixed students into heterogeneous groups, used cooperative games and team-building activities, incorporated culturally

inclusive practices (such as Māori language and values in New Zealand), and fostered personal and social responsibility (Gerdin et al., 2020). Social cohesion was not about sameness; it involved learning to live with and value difference while sharing a sense of belonging. The authors argue that cohesion work must go beyond mere social integration to address the conditions that privilege some groups and marginalise others, and they point to conditions identified in contact theory, such as equal status, cooperation, and shared norms. This resonates with Rentzi's (2024) description of collaborative, peer-based learning in diverse groups as a way to teach students to accept and respect diversity.

IV. *Explicitly teaching about and acting on inequity*

The third theme was **explicit teaching about and acting on social inequities** (Gerdin et al., 2020). Teachers recognised that equity sometimes requires an uneven distribution of resources: modifying game rules for an injured student, lending clothing, arranging extra swimming support for newly arrived refugee students, and introducing Indigenous culture authentically rather than tokenistically. Some teachers also engaged students in analysing how gender, ethnicity, and culture shape participation in sport, and reflected critically on their own positional power and life histories. Gerdin et al. (2020) conclude that teaching *for* social justice (acting on inequity) should be paired with teaching *about* social justice (raising critical consciousness); otherwise students may be ill-prepared to act as agents of change beyond the classroom.

This emphasis on consciousness aligns with the Freirean tradition that Hytten and Bettez (2011) and Stacey et al. (2025) describe, in which education supports conscientisation: awareness of injustice and of one's own role in responding to it, together with more horizontal power relations in educational settings.

V. *Teachers as learners and reflective practitioners*

In Gerdin et al.'s (2020) study, teachers' critical reflection on their own authority, their schooling histories, and their responsibility for student safety shaped their practice. Stacey et al. (2025) similarly argue that critiquing social inequality requires some auto-critique, because educators must examine their own often-unexamined privilege. Teachers who advance social justice are therefore not simply delivering content; they are continuously examining their own assumptions and positions.

ROLE OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Teacher education is a particularly important space for advancing justice because it can have far-reaching implications: what future teachers learn can influence what they later teach in schools, although this relationship is not straightforward (Stacey et al., 2025). Stacey et al. noted that national standards in

Australia require teachers to respond to students from diverse languages, cultures, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds, but most policies focus on technicalities.

Takshashila et al. (2024) reach a complementary conclusion in the context of Indian education System: social justice and human rights should be incorporated into the curriculum, especially in teacher training, and faculty need ongoing professional development, institutional support, and resources to facilitate sensitive discussions. In their study, both students and professors supported mentorship programs, safe spaces for conversation, and workshops that openly discuss caste and economic background.

Hytten and Bettez (2011) state that an efficient teacher education programs should clearly define social justice, model effective practice, address the fears of new teachers when they encounter unfamiliar perspectives, and work collaboratively to protect public education. One common thread across these sources is that teachers cannot be expected to advance justice unless their preparation and their institutions equip and support them to do so.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the literature reviewed, the following implications can be drawn:

1. DEFINE AND DISCUSS JUSTICE TOGETHER - School and program leaders should create space for staff to share the meaning of social justice and plan for its implementation, rather than adopting statements without follow-through (Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

2. ALIGN POLICY WITH SUPPORT- Inclusion policies should be accompanied by mentorship, academic and emotional support, and anti-stigma initiatives (Takshashila et al., 2024).

3. INVEST IN TEACHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING- Programs should prepare teachers to facilitate sensitive discussions, reflect on privilege and power, and design culturally responsive, inclusive learning (Gerdin et al., 2020; Stacey et al., 2025; Takshashila et al., 2024).

4. INTENTIONALLY BUILD RELATIONSHIPS AND RAPPORT- Teachers can learn about students' lives, mix groups, create collaborative tasks, and genuinely incorporate students' cultures (Gerdin et al., 2020).

5. CRITICALLY REDESIGN THE CURRICULUM- Curriculum should reflect the perspectives of diverse groups and question dominant structures (Rentzi, 2024).

6. HANDLE DISCOMFORT THOUGHTFULLY- Educators should understand distress as potentially productive, while also paying attention to students' diverse positions, avoiding rigid categorization, and minimizing unnecessary harm (Stacey et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

Schools and teachers play crucial, interdependent roles in advancing social justice. Schools create the conditions through curriculum, culture, policy, and support structures; teachers translate commitment into daily relationships, inclusive learning, and essential education about inequality. The literature reviewed here shows that this work is conceptually challenging, practically demanding, and emotionally uncomfortable, and it may not always transform structures or benefit all students equally (Gerdin et al., 2020; Stacey et al., 2025). Nevertheless, it also shows that thoughtful, caring, and well-informed practices can make schools more inclusive and equitable. As Stacey et al. (2025) argue, if justice is to be achieved through education, the answer cannot be retreat; rather, it must find ways to do and support the work more effectively.

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