

## Students-Teachers Education and Social Justice: A Case –Study

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**Abstract:** *Teacher education is responsible not only to prepare the teachers to teach, but also to constantly pursue the resolution of social problems locally and globally. This paper is presenting the data from a study conducted with 4<sup>th</sup> year students, who are to become teachers. The purpose of the study was to determine the perceptions of the aspiring teachers concerning social justice issues. Moreover the study is researching the level of understanding young teachers have about the idea and the content of social justice. Also the study pursues to understand who the main factors are for shaping this perception concerning social justice. Furthermore and within this frame the subject of how the gender affects the understanding of inequality is also taken in account. The data were collected with the method of structured interview and their analysis reveals the following: a) they shape their perceptions about social justice through the definition of social injustice, b) social justice is about treating students from different social class or origin (refugees) equally, by giving equal educational opportunities, reducing inequality, providing equal learning environments, c) when authority is unjust and creates situations of social injustice the emotional and psychological impact is profound, d) a teacher must evolve social justice throughout his teaching and by using democratic practices such as: fair or unfair with the students, a free and democratic spirit in the classroom, open discussions and dialogue about social and political issues, empathy, student centered teaching methods, although they believe that teaching and nurturing social justice is not an easy task, e) no differentiations were noticed concerning the influence of gender in behavior (equality, social awareness and social responsibility).*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The improvement of quality and the effectiveness of education is a major priority internationally, as since the 90s the shaping of the educational reality in E.U., was initiated under the combined relationship of educational policies and instruction, with cutting edge policies for competition, employment and social cohesion. (E.U., 2000, The Lisbon Strategy). A major aspect for achieving the goal of improving the quality of education is based on maintaining the basic ideas of justice, freedom and equality. Justice begins from the basic principle of equality and is combined with the principle of freedom. According to the theory of Rawls concerning justice, society, therefore school also, must operate in terms of social justice, where institutions, rights and obligations are being allocated cooperatively and in the best possible way (Rawls, 2001: 29). The idea of social justice through theoretical texts is mostly related with the idea of social harmony, meaning the existence of reciprocity and equality in a society (Dimitrakos, 2003).

According to Hackman (2005), education for social justice is as much a purpose as a process. It is defined by cooperativeness, incorporation, participation, democracy, dialogue, emancipation, student centered teaching and a criticism for social correlations. A teacher who wishes to eliminate the inequalities should be: a) aiming to the students normal embodiment to the social environment, b) having the same demands from all students by providing a motivating learning environment, c) cooperating with the local community thus trying to expand the school further to the society, d) always making efforts so that education is governed by the principles of social justice (resources, political processes) and e) making those interventions throughout the learning process so that social equality and justice prevail and not to permit any form of oppression (Carlisle, Jackson & George, 2006).

### 2. TEACHERS TEACHING

The purposes of education reflect the opinions that prevail and the values of the society and provide the frame for the teachers teaching policy. (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Modern educational systems are focused in evaluating students and teachers. It is taken for granted that teaching is a technical matter, that knowledge is static (so curriculums are not reformed periodically), that there is one and only good

practice in teaching who can be generalized, that readiness for teaching depends on knowing the curriculum and finally that learning is equal to higher grades in the tests. But, when education is designed to lead in social justice, other values are emphasized. In this perspective: a) teaching is practicing a professional estimation, b) knowledge is always transforming, c) there are no generalized and whole practice, however there are attitudes and behaviors that lead to a much more qualitative teaching, d) readiness for teaching is equal to the ability of being ready and e) learning equals with acquiring skills, attitudes and behaviors who ultimately make a student responsible, active, democratic citizen, giving him possibilities for evolution and development.

So if education is considered the most effective way of economic growth, creation of productive workers-responsible citizens and a factor in improving the competitiveness of national economies, we need to focus on the training of teachers, to equip future teachers with critical awareness of themselves and their students as learners are and interact in a specific social environment (Guyton, 2000).

There is a number of teacher education programs mentioning in their curricula, terms, such as "social justice," "multiculturalism," "compensatory action", "social equality", and "social- critical pedagogy" as much as in their descriptions as in connection with the subjects offered, (Brookfield, 1995 · Ghaye & Ghaye, 2003 · Zeichner & Liston, 1996). However they are not always followed by the necessary and in-depth transformation of the curriculum structures, nor the transformation of the teachers themselves (McDonald, 2005).

Within this aspect the gap may be closed by teacher training; It is a basic institution which is essential both for the continuous professional development as well as their further evolution. This training includes procedures directly related to the planning, organization and implementation of programs which aim at the motivation of the interest of the teachers. There is a renewal and an enrichment of their field of knowledge, based on their specialty but also general issues of education and, in parallel, is to improve and further develop their abilities and skills in terms of daily teaching practice (try to connect the content of each lesson with the development of various skills of the student, providing learning motivation, cooperation with parents and other social partners, etc.) (Richardson, 1998). According to all the above, a teacher should be trained in at regular intervals, and extraordinarily, whenever there are specific needs. For this reason, a short in duration training is formed but in long range, decentralized, repetitive and polymorphic, which includes mandatory activities, aimed at the professional improvement of education (Flanders, 1963).

### **3. TEACHERS AND THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Recently, the scientific debate on the open and democratic atmosphere inside the classroom has started to include the concept of social justice. It is approached either through the dimension of the theory on the ideal concept of social justice or on the opposite side with the dimension of presenting examples of social injustice.

So when teachers examine social justice issues they are inevitably involved in a contradicting field of epistemological issues between the ideal conditions of social justice and the reality of it and a pursuit of this justice through dealing with injustice. Although there is a number of a survey on education in the field of social justice, especially through programs, the research results have been lightly understood by teachers as well as how this is related to their pedagogical practices (Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2003).

#### **3.1. Aim of Study**

The study aims to identify the teacher candidates' attitudes with regard to social justice issues. The research questions were as follows:

1. What is the level of understanding of the concept of social justice?
2. What are the main factors shaping the perceptions of teachers applying for social justice?
3. There is a significant difference between the gender of teachers in perceptions of inequality?

#### **3.2. The Research Method**

Immigration in Greece has taken quite a dimension in recent years and the concerns that have been raised about the introduction to students in the schools not only from different social and economic

origin but mainly from a different cultural and racial background, aroused the interest to investigate the dimension and understanding of the degree of social justice that exists in schools. Our work investigates the views of teacher candidates on social justice. The research tool used for data collection was a structured interview, where the interviewer follows a predetermined set of questions, without deviating from it, because in this way we seek to examine specific visual of the matter and in particular the views of respondents on specific issues related to social justice in education. The interview as a research technique has found many fields of application · an instrument to assess personality or knowledge of an individual, to explore attitudes and beliefs, for selecting a worker etc. (Cohen & Manion, 2000; Bernard-Russell, 2000).

### 3.3. The sample

The sample is consisted of twenty-two candidate Teachers of the Department of Primary Education (University of Ioannina). The decision to include fourth year students, was based a) on the fact that they have already been taught the basic required courses and b) all fourth year students are practicing in teaching inside the classroom in real time, thus forming an idea about the institution. After a thorough research the students selected, have all been evaluated and graded successfully (7.5-10) in Pedagogics and Social studies. The survey was conducted in the period from October to December of the academic year 2016-2017.

The questionnaire used for interviewing the researchers, for data collection and testing of assumptions was based on the following areas:

1. the perceptions of teacher candidates in understanding social justice
2. the main factors that shape the perceptions of teacher candidates on social justice
3. the views of both genders concerning inequality

### 3.4. Data Analysis

From interviewing the teacher candidates, there has been an indication that there were three groups forming the basic classification according to their beliefs on the understanding of social justice:

- A. social justice is the opposite situation of social injustice (prior knowledge: social injustice experience)
- B. social justice is necessary particularly in the newly forming school environment as it is affected by the immigrants who are entering Greece
- C. it is not easy, but we need to teach social justice (knowledge).

From the data analysis emerged that the majority of teacher candidates is forming perceptions of social justice through the definition of social injustice. They point out that they experienced the importance of social justice through experiences of social injustice and gained more knowledge on the subject through the experiences of those who faced social injustice. However, for them, social justice is defined by an equal treatment of students from different social class or a different origin (with reference to immigrants), equal educational opportunities, the removal of inequalities, the equality concerning the conditions of learning. Seven students strongly believe there are no discriminations among the pupils, therefore social justice exists. Based on their knowledge and personal experience they punctuated the advantages of social justice in schools underlining the necessity in an intercultural school environment, as it is formed the last two years in Greece. Some subjects of the sample (11) reported the necessity of evolving the students' potential and exploiting their skills. Another outcome with great importance concerns the feelings demonstrated by the members of the sample about social injustice. The fact that social injustice leads to a society with actual victims made the students to express feelings of anger, including anger towards authority when unjust, for this creates situations of social injustice. This knowledge was acquired through their experiences by forming relationships with others and facing relevant facts. The majority of feelings reported concerning social injustice at school, hence the lack of social justice is pain, anger, suffering, guilt, responsibility. These feelings have helped not only to better understand the idea of social justice but also inspired them to function even better as teachers during their practice teaching. To the question concerning whether and how to organize the learning process in order to promote social justice at school, answers in the majority have placed great responsibility to the teacher. A teacher should promote social justice through teaching, through democratic practices (fair or unfair to the students, open democratic classroom climate, open discussion and dialogue on social and political issues, empathy, student-centered teaching). Courses

of Social Sciences give growing opportunities of social justice to evolve, although the majority of the sample answered that teaching and evolving social justice is not easy.

The results of the research and data analysis show that there were no significant differences of views concerning the differentiation of the gender. Consequently both sexes had similar views on the behavior according to the principles of equality, social awareness and social responsibility. It points out, that there was a significant difference (0.05) between the two sexes as far as perceiving the discrimination. Boys seem to be more aware of discrimination as opposed to girls.

Here are some particular examples of the sampled subjects:

"I have experienced social injustice many times. When one family member had to live with it, it affected me also. I realized that people behave in racist ways from very early on. I saw how people reacted when facing my father and listening to his name "(Kelly).

"The problem is not the differences, the problem is the hierarchy. When some cultures are stronger, the other civilizations follow. This is the problem "(John).

Another student, Christos told us of weakness. "I am experiencing severe injustice because some people have pointed me out. When one experiences this type of behavior, he never really knows why it happens. It could be personal, racial, linguistic, cultural or any of this. But no one really knows the exact causes. I'm in a situation where I'm completely useless. "

Social injustice due to lack of power can be understood by the recognition of ones privileges. For example, Helen learned about poverty through the experience of a scholarship, which enabled her to understand the weakness of social origin. She met consciously issues of power between different groups of people. She stated characteristically that "you have to be ready for what you do not know"

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from all the replies of the sample subjects, it is found that they themselves created the concept of social justice dialectically. They understood the meaning and the dimension of social justice as an opposite situation of social injustice. They supported the need for diversification of pedagogy in multicultural environments and despite the challenges, they expressed in a high percentage (89%) that are willing to work for social justice and social action.

The fact that the candidate teachers perceive that social sensitivity is one of the most important issues related to social justice, is very positive. People who are not socially sensitive can not analyze and resolve issues of social justice.

Furthermore, social awareness is an essential ability of candidate teachers, in order to understand and to teach social justice. A teacher who is not known for social awareness may not be able to feel social responsibility.

An equally important finding is that the majority of respondents consider that the role of the teacher is important, as far as their training allows, so through their teaching practices they can develop the idea of social justice.

Social sciences are more important for teaching social justice although from the replies it is stated indirectly the realization that the promotion of social justice is not only a matter of the teaching contents, but is also derived from the daily practice in education as it relates to the behavior of the teacher and to the educational practices he uses (democratic classroom, open discussions, cooperative learning, experiential learning, critical capacity development, promoting interculturalism, understanding the Other) (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2014; Gniewosz & Noack, 2008: 609-624). So, this finding should be taken seriously in account, not only in terms of the teaching approach that promotes democratic political skills and helps to develop the capacity of young people to seek more cognitive information, to analyze different ways of thinking but also in the ways the social behavior of the teacher and the daily educational process that has to be regulated by democratic structures and processes such as:

- a. The respect of democratic principles by involving all members of the school community in the decision-making process,
- b. To promote cooperation,
- c. To support equal opportunities,
- d. The implementation of a democratic curriculum.

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