OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CULTURAL RELEVANT PEDAGOGY

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# Abstract

The paper is a brief overview of two classroom pedagogical techniques: a) social justice pedagogy, b) cultural relevant pedagogy. These two classroom teaching techniques have been gaining some popularity recently and are consistent with NCTM and recent CCSSI standards. I tried to give brief historical backgrounds, definitions of the teachings, and relate literature references of the pedagogy. In this paper, I attempted to explain the pedagogy from three perspectives: a) Implementation in classroom, b) Student’s performance, and c) Challenges in implementing the pedagogy. Readers will gain a general knowledge on these two theories and learn about scholars who have contributed to develop and expand the pedagogy.

# Overview of Social Justice and Cultural Relevant Pedagogy

Achieving equity and closing achievement gaps are the two most fundamental challenges educators facing in their classrooms nowadays. Social justice and cultural relevant pedagogy are two methods that address these challenges. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards and newly adopted Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) also put a lot of emphasis on gaining an in depth knowledge and understanding in subject knowledge. Social justice and cultural relevant pedagogy could be two important approaches in establishing and maintaining these standards. I will use mathematics throughout the paper to describe situations when necessary. However, instead of focusing only on mathematics, I will try to give a general overview of these two pedagogies in classrooms.

# Historical Context

Social justice and culturally relevant teaching have been two important discourses in education practices for quite a long time now (Gonzalez, 2009; Gutstein E. , 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995).To understand the shortcomings and achieveent gaps in our classrooms or across the schools, we need to pair these two instructional frameworks as one does not describe the whole problem. By combining the two pedagogical techniques in classrooms, we can motivate marginalized students to engage in the subject matter (specially mathematics) as they grapple with ineuqtibale and oppressive influences in their lives (Gonzalez, 2009; Gutstein E., 2012; Martin, 2009). Scholars, such as de Freitas (2008), goes as far to claim that “addressing social justice issues should be a primary goal of all education – including mathematics education”(p.43).

Social justice and cultural relevant pedagogy fall under the broad definion of critical pedagogy. Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire is regarded as the founder of critical pedagogy through his famous work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in 1968. As defined by Stinson et al. (2012), critical pedagogy is in existense for more than four decades in the United States (p. 76). So these two approaches are nothing new in education. Yet we have seen very little application in our classrooms until Gutstein (2003) applied social justice pedagogy in his classroom discourse in two Chicago area high schools. On the other hand, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) is credited for bringing cultural relevant pedagogy into attention.

Social Justice Pedagogy

Teaching for social justice is a philosophy in education that tries to mitigate the boundaries of general curriculum such as race, class, ability, language, appearance, sexuality, gender etc. The pedagogy is centered on the promotion of equity through social justice and installing such values in students. In particular, mathematics teachers employing social justice pedagogies include mathematics specific goals for their students (Bartell, 2013; Gutstein, 2012). For example, in mathematics classroom the pedagogy invloves using mathematics to study and understand their world, strengthen their knowledge of mathematics, learn about social injustices, and promote actions towards equity. Teaching mathematics for social justice can also empower marginalized students to change the status quo and not merely fit into it (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Similar approaches could be taken in other subjects to promote equity and awareness through social justice pedagogy.

Although the pedagogy have gained some popularity in education arena, teaching for social justice has also provoked some citicism. Ctitics argue that there is not enough evidence supporing the effectiveness of the pedagogy and whether it really brings either behavirol or instructional changes. Another critical argument is that one can not (and should not) teach values explicitly, it has to be taught through experience.

## Implementation in Classroom

There are no set guidelines or rules in implementing social justice pedagogy in classrooms. We have to look at various aspects such as student relationships, teacher relationships, classroom composition, socioeconomic status (SES) of the student body etc. So the implementation of the pedagogy will vary from one classroom to another.

In the modern realm of teaching and learning, students should be active participants in the learning process. In this pedagogy, a great deal of emphasis is put into group discussion and project. So students have to play an untraditional role in the classroom, instead of being the receiver of knowledge they have to be the investigator of knowledge as they collaborate with peers. The physical environment of the classroom is another important part of the pedagogy and it has to be set up such a way to support collaborative learning. Studies have shown that clustered desks enable peer collaboration as well as small group discussions. Overall, the classrooms have to serve as a community of learning. On the other hand, critiques will argue that a lot of these requirements are simply not possible due to large class sizes, limited spaces, diverse cultural and language barriers etc.

In social justice pedagogy, in fact probably in any pedagogy, the most important role will be played by the teachers. The relationship between teachers and students will affect the teaching of social justice. The key for teachers is to implement the pedagogy unhurriedly. Social justice is not a commonly used pedagogy and students will have hard times to comprehend it at the beginning. As Gutstein (2003) mentions, “Students may think you’re from Mars the first time you ask them to use mathematics to study their own live: few have had such experiences” (p. 66). Teachers have to have a good knowledge about their students. In this process, both teachers and students learn from each other. Teachers must consider what knowledge students are likely to bring, what strategies students may use, and how student’s knowledge connects to the various mathematical concepts in designing the lessons. The process involves anticipation of student response, observation and reflection of students’ thinking and knowledge development, and making adjustments as necessary. By helping students understand how they learn helps them to identify their strengths and weaknesses as learners (Gonzalez, 2009). Thus the purpose of the teachers is to propose learning through facilitation, which can aid in the production of knowledge. Social justice pedagogy is a unique metacognitive approach to learning. Here students can develop new ways to use their strengths in order to improve their weaknesses.

Another aspect of social justice pedagogy is to understand that equality is not same as justice in classroom. Creating an environment of equal access does not guarantee equal opportunity for success in classrooms. The cartoon below will illustrate the difference between equity and justice:

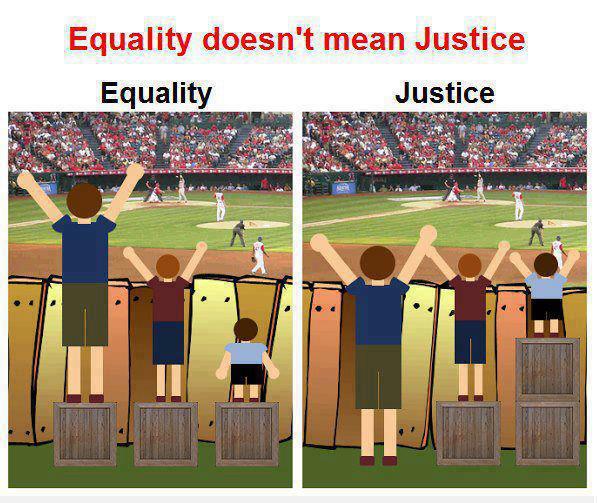


Figure: Equality does not mean justice[[1]](#footnote-1)

Today’s classrooms are more diverse than ever. Students come from various cultural, lifestyles, values, languages, and SES backgrounds. So teachers need to be critically conscious. They have to offer students with well-planned and appropriate units that foster learning and deeper understanding of content knowledge. The NCTM and CCSSI also mandate these standards. Moreover, classroom environment and curriculum has to build upon the acknowledgement of diversity of student rather than neglecting their experiences. Teachers also need to match students’ societal experience to the curriculum and instructional practices. A good example could be found in Gutstein’s (2003) development of mathematical contents around students’ interest and background in two Chicago area high schools.

*Student’s performance*

Measuring student performance via various standardized tests and assessments is a popular concept to our administrators and taxpayers. Even though successful implementation of the pedagogy shows improved results among students, social justice pedagogy does not directly work towards raising students’ scores on tests. Rather it focuses on developing awareness on various inequality and injustices, gaining in-depth knowledge on those issues, and preparing students to raise their voices in closing achievement gaps using various subject matters (specially mathematics) in classroom. None of these are measureable in our “very popular” standardized assessments. So one may not see the direct benefit of such pedagogy our classrooms. But as evident from Gutstein’s (2003) work, for example, teaching math using social justice pedagogy is a very powerful tool to learn and actually understand mathematics. The same conclusion could be drawn for other subject matter as well. Gutstein (2003) also observed that his students “performs adequately” on the tests even thought the intention was never there to pass the standardized tests. Gutstein (2003) presents a student’s comment in his paper:

Yes, I learned math in your class. I learned it in a different way of course but I still learned it. I realized that we were learning a lot of math concepts from different mathematics sections. Meaning, in our work, I learned some trig, calculus and others, while still using it to complete our goals of the class. (p. 72-73)

Other researchers have found similar results in their students’ performance, as well as teachers’ expectation, using social justice pedagogy (Bartell, 2013; Gonzalez, 2009; Leonard et al., 2010). However, we must understand that the purpose of the pedagogy is not to raise the scores on tests, rather to seek equity and justice through the subject matter. The indiret effect, nevertheless, is better knowledge and performance of students on assessments. Using social justice pedagogy in classroom, we can make students aware of their situations and have them build a positive orientation towards learning.

*Challenges in implementing the pedagogy*

Our education system is heavly dependent upon assessments and measurement of student learning. With each reform movement, since late 1800’s with the Committee of Ten up to in 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act, each successive movement have put increased emphasis on standardized assessment. However, the outcomes of social justice pedagogy is not directly measurable. On the other hand, implementing and training teachers to effectively use the pedagogy is a whole different challenge, as *one-size-fits-all* technique will not do the job. Moreover administrators, political leaders, and other status quo may not like the idea that students, specially minority goups, start to challenge their authority. Gutstein (2003) faced the same challenges from the administrators and other leaders during his 2 year tenure in Chicago area schools. But parents and students came to his rescue.

Some critiques might argue that social justice pedagogy politicizes the education. However, Freire (Paulo Feire, 1987) and others will argue that “education *is* politics”. We can not and should not separate the two as politics influences education and vice-versa. People in power may not like the idea that we are empowering students with the knowledge in social injustices. They even might feel thretened and hold on to the status quo mentality. But social justice pedagogy, if implemented properly, will serve as a very powerful tool in eliminating achievement gaps. It will also make students, specially minority and under served students, intereste in learning in schools.

Cultural Relevant Pedagogy

Cultural relevant pedagogy, sometimes also reffered as cultural responsive pedagogy, is a teaching practice that recognizes the diversity in a classroom and adjusts teaching methods to account for the cultural characteristics of studetns from diverse background. To apply this pedagogy properly, teachers need to show competence in skill at teaching in a cross-cultural and/or multicultural setting. Moreover, teachers must appreciate and encourage the knowledge and inputs from students of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Cultural relevant pedagogy is a technique to relate course content to the student’s cultural context.

Given the wealth of diversity in our public schools, cultural relevant pedagogy should be a obvious fit in our classrooms. However, critics argue that before it could be applied in classrooms, teachers need to have an awareness on different cultures, beiefs, races, creeds etc. Considering the diversity of our classroom, this is not an easy task. On the other hand, NCTM standards (NCTM, 2000), using mathematics as an example, suggest that teachers draw on the multiple facets of students’ culture to make connections to mathematics. However, Leonard et al. (2010) debunks the standard arguing,

“these (NCTM Standards) include the incorporation of narrow conceptualizations and irrelevant examples that do not lead to positive student identity, independent learning, mathematical empowerment, and development of critical thinking” .(p. 267)

So in implementing cultural pedagogy, we must be careful not to include insignificant contents that does not lead to positive learnings. Teachers need to adapt these skills to understand and implement the pedagogy effectively.

*Implementations in classroom*

Even though culturally relevant pedagogy may commonly refer to intruction of African American students, it has been proven to be an effective form of pedagogy for students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leonard, 2008). Many studies, such as Yup’ik (Native Eskimo) project as mentioned by Leonard et al. (2010), have shown the successful implementation of such teachings in classrooms.

Cultural relevant pedagogy has some key components. The teaching has to acknolwledge the strenghts of students’ diverse heritages. Cultural relevant pedagogy encompasses many different areas and applies multcultural approach to the classroom environment, teaching methods, and evaluation. The purpose of teaching is to empower students, give them opportunities to excel in the classroom and beyond, boost their personal confidence and will to act.

Teachers will play a key role in creating a culturally relevant environemnt that reaches diverse audiences in their classrooms. Teachers must demonstrate that they care for their students, because a genuine attitude of interest is likely to yield positive emotions that empower and motivates students (Leonard J. , 2008). Two of the successful techniques that are often disscused are reciprocal teaching and coopertive learning. Through reciprocal teaching, students and teachers take turns in leading classroom discussions. In cooperative learning, collaboration in completions of assignments is encouraged instead of competitiveness. Other techniques that promote the pedagogy may include games and cross-cultural activities, family history research, reflective writing on students’ own belief and assumptions etc.

Technology can play a vital role in making connection between the curriculum and 21st century learner as cultural relevant pedagogy intneds. Through technology, cultural relevant teaching can help to close the gap between school learning and real-world needs of students. Students now can use technology, by means of softwares, in various contexts to break the isolation between school subject matter and real-world situations. Thus use of technology can be an effective tool to create an cultural relevant teaching environment.

We can summarize, according to Leonard (2008), the characteristics as those most closely associated with culturally relevant teaching as:

* Treat students as competent;
* Provide instructional “scaffolding” in order for students to move from what they know to what they need to know;
* Demonstrate instruction has high priority;
* Extend students’ thinking and abilities; and
* Possess in-depth knowledge of both students and subject matter. (p. 42)

*Student’s performance*

Overall, cultural relevant pedagogy supports the three goals of studetn development in classroom: a) academic success, b) cultural competence, and c) development of critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Students must develop their basic academic skills despite of injustices and inequalities, as these skills are needed to eliminate the discriminations they face in the society. Cultural competence will help students to get comfortble in their cultures and learn to appreciate it. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that students must “maintain some cultural integrigy as well as academic excellence” (p. 160). Through development of critical consciousness, students will develop “a border sociopolitical consciousness” (Ladson-Billings, 1995), to critique injustices and inequalities, and help closing such discriminations.

As we can see from characteristics of cultural relevant teaching, it helps to develop a well-rounded individual. Again, it’s hard to measure the success or direct influence of the pedagogy through standardized assessments. We have to look at varous factors to evaluate the outcomes. Numerous studies have found that minority studetns underperform in classroom as we try to assimilate them instead of acculturate them in our schools (Leonard, 2008). Cultural relevant pedagogy invetigates differnet aspects of students cultures and use it to maximize students’ learning. Cultural relevant pedagogy also highlights the fact that learning is a mediated process and highly dependent upon students’ cultural experiences. So we need to incorporate a strategy in our teaching that is relevant to students’ culture and cognition.

*Challenges in implementing the pedagogy*

Not all educators favor culturally relevant teaching due to many practical challenges in impleting such pedagogy in our classrooms. To successfully implement the pedagogy, teachers must get comfortable to the curriculum, methodology, teaching methods, and instructional materials to connecet with students’ values and norms. It will require a lot of self reflections, teaching, training, and professional developments of teachers. Moreover, a lot of teachers are not comfortable of addresing issues such as discrimination, racism, poverty etc. in their classroom. So some teachers have to get out of their comfort zone to address the pedagogy. On the other hand, even teachers are committed to the pedagogy, the lack of resources such as access to materials, knowledge-base, and support to facilitate or enhance their implementation of such pedagogy, often does not allow them to act upon their commitment. Other challenges such as time constraints, budget, pre-service and in-service training, and teachers’ own levels of awareness and willingness may impede the implementation of the pedagogy into their curriculum.

Conclusion

According to Leonard et al. (Jacqueline Leonard, 2010), social justice and cultural relevant pedagogy can not be prescribed or scrippted. The implementation of pedagogy is largly dependent upon classrooms’ composition, students’ background, prepardness and willingness of teachers and administrators etc. However, we can not ovelook these two components in our classrooms. The student population of our classrooms have changed. Today a large number of students come from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. We need to create an environment where these children do not feel isolated or being left out, rather get an opportunity to learn. Social justice and cultural relevant pedagogy alone will neither solve every problem nor will guaranttee to increase students’s performance in schools. In fact, none of these two policy advocate such promise. Instead, it will promote equal access for all and create an environment where each child gets fair opportunity towards a meaningful educational experience.

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1. <http://robertmijas.com/blog/cartoon-equality-does-not-mean-justice/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)