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## What is Social Justice? Opening a Discussion

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# What is Social Justice? Opening a Discussion

**Abstract**

This paper is a record of a discussion on social justice that took place at California State University San Bernardino on January 23, 2013. It addresses the definition of what social justice is, what injustice is, and the significance of a concern for social justice for educators. Multiple viewpoints are included.

**Keywords**

social justice, education, democracy, injustice, equity, dividing lines, discourse

**Author Statement**

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### **What is social justice? Opening a discussion**

The Research and Scholarship Committee of the California State University San Bernardino College of Education decided in 2013 to pursue the theme of ‘social justice’ in a seminar series. The purpose was to ask some questions about social justice, to interrogate it as a concept and then to think about what it might mean for practice. This seminar was not intended to be definitive or to deliver any particular answer to questions about social justice. It was just trying to bring out the various voices that might be heard in a conversation on this topic. The aim of the exercise was facilitate members of the university community to think through the academic and practical issues involved.

This paper is a record of the first conversation in this series. The seminar series was intended to continue through the Winter and into the Spring quarter of 2013. The hope for the series was to generate an ongoing conversation that contributes to the research culture of the College of Education (and beyond). Participants were not required to agree with every perspective presented. There always needs to be room for different viewpoints. There are certainly multiple perspectives on social justice and there was no intention to establish any kind of orthodoxy.

The opening conversation was intended to establish a field of inquiry. It was built around five questions:

- Why focus on social justice?
- Why does it have to be defined?
- What is social justice?
- What is social injustice?

- What does social justice have to do with education?

### **Why focus on social justice?**

The seminar began with some starting ideas to help answer the question: ‘Why focus on social justice?’ One answer to this question could be that we should focus on social justice because it is mentioned in the College of Education mission statement, which asserts:

‘Our core beliefs in

- the dignity and inherent worth of all people,
- diversity and multiple perspectives as essential, treasured assets,
- a collaborative teaching/learning community,
- the crucial leadership role of education professionals in promoting positive social change fostering human development, achieving social justice, and promoting human rights’

The California State University San Bernardino College of Education mission statement is also expanded in the ‘conceptual framework’ that is intended to guide teaching and learning in the College, specifically in the following statements:

‘We accomplish our mission through our personal and professional commitment to practice the following behaviors, which we model for and encourage in our students:

- comprehend the specific contexts experienced by our

students and use that understanding to make instructional decisions;

- respect the experiences of various groups with whom we interact and make concerted efforts to incorporate knowledge of and sensitivity to those experiences in (a) professional decisions and (b) interactions with students, colleagues and members of the broader community;

In order to embrace such a mission, it is arguable that an ongoing conversation needs to be enjoined if the mission is not to become moribund.

Neither is the California State University San Bernardino College of Education alone in this belief. The following universities, for example, all express a commitment to ‘teaching for social justice’: University of Massachusetts, Amherst; The University of South Carolina; The University of Regina; Evergreen State College; State University of New York at Oswego; Pennsylvania State University; Swarthmore College; University of California Los Angeles; and the University of Washington.

Closer to home, the following California State University (CSU) Colleges of Education all talk about social justice or related concepts in their mission statements or other central documents.

CSU East Bay mission statement:

‘to prepare collaborative leaders committed to professional excellence, social justice and democracy, who will influence a diverse and interconnected world.’

CSU Long Beach conceptual framework:

‘... as we teach about equity, we also co-construct a vision with our candidates regarding how to address inequities in classrooms, schools, clinics, postsecondary institutions, and

other educational and community environments.’

San Diego State University Mission statement:

‘The College engages in strategic partnerships with the field of practice to improve client outcomes, to increase institutional effectiveness, and to promote social justice.’

San Jose State University:

‘The result is the college’s commitment to the preparation of educators, including teachers, administrators, counselors and service providers who have the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and ethics that ensure equity and excellence for all students in a culturally diverse, technologically complex, global community.’

San Francisco State University:

‘To prepare professional educators and service providers to effectively work with individuals of all ages, diverse cultures, languages, learning styles, abilities, sensory and physical challenges, ethnicity, and sexual orientations, in schools and other community settings.’

‘To prepare educational leaders to be socially committed advocates for the people they serve.’

Sonoma State University’s NCATE

report:

‘They commended our programs because social justice permeates every aspect of every program as evidenced by the eloquent and inspiring testimonials that our candidates and recent grads provided.’

The wording is not identical, nor are the perspectives embodied in the words completely consistent, but there is enough overlap to posit a commitment to social

*WISDOM IN EDUCATION – VOL. 5, ISS. 1*

justice as a strong theme in the California State University system wide purposes of teacher preparation.

So what about the educational accrediting bodies: California Commission for Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)? Neither of them use the expression ‘social justice’. They refer instead to the less robust, and less contentious, term ‘diversity’.

CTCC

(Faculty) ‘They are reflective of a diverse society and knowledgeable about diverse abilities, cultural, language, ethnic and gender diversity.’

(Candidates) ‘Candidates preparing to serve as professional school personnel know and demonstrate the professional knowledge and skills necessary to educate and support effectively all students in meeting the state-adopted academic standards.’

NCATE

‘Candidates develop and demonstrate proficiencies that support learning by all students as shown in their work with students with exceptionalities and those from diverse ethnic/racial, linguistic, gender, and socioeconomic groups in classrooms and schools.’

‘Curriculum, field experiences, and clinical practice promote candidates’ development of knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions related to diversity identified in the unit’s conceptual framework. The active participation of candidates from diverse cultures and with different experiences is solicited, valued, and promoted in classes, field experiences, and clinical practice. Candidates reflect on and analyze these experiences in ways that enhance their

development and growth as professionals.’

The accrediting bodies want teachers to be conscious of diversity among students but they stop short of suggesting that teachers should address injustice between diverse groups. Does this mean that teachers should be aware of diversity and sensitive to differences between individuals but not do anything about inequity when they see it? Or does it reject the assertion that social injustice exists and that equality of individuals before the law is all that is needed? It is not entirely clear and this is one debate that needs further discussion.

The Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan is more forthright. In October 2009 he said:

‘I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice.’

Although he is not very specific about what fighting for social justice might entail, he does locate it squarely in the center of the practice of teaching.

A quick glance at educational theorists yields statements from three well-known educators from the last hundred years: John Dewey, Paulo Freire and Linda Darling-Hammond.

The term ‘social justice’ was not part of the discourse in Dewey’s day but he did write about education in terms of social transformation. In ‘The School and Society’ John Dewey wrote:

‘Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself.’

And:

‘Whenever we have in mind the discussion of a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social view.’ ‘It is to this, then, that I especially ask your attention: the effort to conceive what roughly may be termed the “New Education” in the light of larger changes in society.’ (pp. 10-11.)

Education is thus linked in Dewey’s thought to the focus on making changes in society. He also links social differences in educational opportunity to social class differences:

‘If we go back a few centuries, we find a practical monopoly of learning. The term possession of learning is, indeed, a happy one. Learning was a class matter. This was a necessary result of social conditions.’ (p. 36.)

Then he argues that economic changes create the opportunity for increased educational chances for many (greater social justice) with the advent of public education.

‘But, as a direct result of the industrial revolution of which we have been speaking, this has been changed. Printing was invented; it was made commercial. Books, magazines, papers were multiplied and cheapened. As a result of the locomotive and telegraph, frequent, rapid, and cheap intercommunication by mails and electricity was called into being. Travel has been rendered easy; freedom of movement, with its accompanying exchange of ideas, indefinitely facilitated. The result has been an intellectual revolution. Learning has been put into circulation. While there still is, and probably always will be, a particular class having the special

business of inquiry in hand, a distinctively learned class is henceforth out of the question. It is an anachronism. Knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquefied. It is actively moving in all the currents of society itself.’(p. 36-7.)

Paulo Freire (2000) is more critical of what happens in schools when he suggests that the ‘banking method of education’ produces docility in the face of injustice. He advocates instead a ‘dialogical’, consciousness-raising mode of education that changes ‘students’ view of the world’.

‘In contrast with the anti-dialogical and non-communicative ‘deposits’ of the banking method of education, the program content of the problem-posing method – dialogical par excellence – is constituted and organized by the students’ view of the world ... the content thus constantly expands and renews itself. The task of the dialogical teacher ... is to “re-present” that universe to the people from whom she or he first received it – and “re-present” it not as a lecture, but as a problem.’

(From *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 91).

In a recent book, Linda Darling-Hammond (2010), argues that,

‘... the United States needs to move much more decisively than it has in the last quarter century to establish a purposeful, equitable education system that will prepare all our children for success in a knowledge-based society... It also means finally making good on the unmet American promise that education will be made available to all on equal terms, so that every member of this society can realize a productive life and contribute to the greater welfare.’ (pp. 2-3.)

Against the background of these voices and their collective calls for social justice (albeit without a clearly consistent voice), our seminar participants in the first seminar considered the five questions designated above. What follows is a rudimentary analysis of the themes that emerged in an edited transcription of comments made by participants.

### **Why focus on social justice?**

One reason for grappling with social justice is that it is a topic of conversation in the public domain. The above quotations indicate that. But engaging in the conversation should be justified by more substantial reasons than that others are talking about it. One comment to this effect from the seminar was:

‘Given that many other voices as illustrated are advocating social justice, we should consider it as a goal of education, but that is not enough of a reason. We should surely find a more compelling reason than just to join the trend or espouse the fad.’

A starting point for further examination is the democratic vision of free access to public education for all. Social justice is implicit perhaps within that vision.

‘I would say that free public education for all symbolizes what social justice is. Regardless of who you are, you get access to the local classroom. So free public education is the first premise of social justice.’

For another participant the issue of social justice goes beyond public schooling and includes the university as an educational site as well. In this argument production of social justice through specific action produces benefits for the institution as well as for the individual.

‘I’d like to actually to broaden it beyond the College of Education and look at it as a whole institutional thing. I think that the concept of social justice has a much broader impact in the university. As an institution it makes us a more equitable place and helps us to refocus students when they need it on the developmental aspect and corrective action for a more positive outcome. I’m very interested in advancing this concept in a way that benefits the entire organization.’

In a different vein, some participants stressed that social justice was worth consideration simply because social injustice harms people and an ethic of care for others demands that we address issues that cause such harm.

‘I think we also need a focus that is existential or phenomenological and addresses the individual. We care about social justice because social injustice harms people. It harms their sense of self, their sense of potential, where they can go, what they can do, what they can imagine themselves doing. That creates the tangible outcomes of social injustice. There’s the level of distribution and systems and then there’s the other level of recognition, of affirmation and endorsement of others that is an essential component of social justice. We are interested in social justice because we care about people.’

This statement does not identify the source of the harm but another participant saw at least some of the harm being produced in the school.

‘One of the reasons we might care about social justice is because in some instances there is strong evidence that

WISDOM IN EDUCATION – VOL. 5, ISS. 1

schooling operates to create injustice. It has sometimes to some extent been an engine of injustice.’

Another participant referenced the harm arising in the relationship between the educational institution and the aspiring teacher.

‘Another reason is that sometimes there is a mismatch between why people become involved in education and whether or not the institution itself thwarts those motivations. Perhaps the conversation about social justice has to happen in order to bring institutions in alignment with those who enter into them. People often go into education with a focus on things like emancipation and the institution begins to domesticate them to give up those goals. And inevitably the institution wins and the individual loses.’

**Why does it have to be defined?**

The question of why social justice needs to be defined carefully was not discussed extensively in the seminar but the need for clarity to avoid frustration and to produce more precise action was canvassed.

‘Because many people have quite different ideas about what social justice is. We need to create rough consensus as the foundation for conversation. Otherwise we create frustration. This does not mean we all have to agree on singular definitions. But we can converse more productively if we know where we each are coming from. The other reason is that clearer definitions lead to more precise actions.’

**What is social justice?**

The most substantial conversation produced in the seminar circled around the

question of what social justice actually is. We begin with a reflection on the words themselves.

‘Social justice is a concept that grows out of a consideration of the social, so it needs to include a definition of the social. And an idea of justice needs to be elaborated. In a sense all justice is social and the concept of social justice is a tautology. So why use it? Probably to make a distinction. Social justice implies the existence of some other kind of justice, which is probably justice in its legal sense. But the law was invented to create justice in relations between people. So if we need to articulate another kind of justice we are in a sense pointing to the failure of the legal form of justice to address all the situations we are concerned about. Why might this be? It is perhaps because the law addresses structural issues. It does not get at the ways in which justice is a matter of discourse that gets inside people’s heads, creating a sense of failure or unworthiness in some, confidence and entitlement in others, categorization of people into certain camps, treating people as “Other”.’

Distinctions between different meanings of social justice started to emerge as the conversation developed.

‘There seem to be two things that are somewhat related but somewhat separate. One is social justice as equity of access to education. Another one is about social justice in education as education being transformative in addressing problems outside of education itself. The Paulo Freire thing is about education as consciousness-raising and addressing broader problems than just the equity of educational attainment. I think



those two things are somewhat conflated when we talk about social justice. Arne Duncan is I think talking about equal access for everyone. Maybe it would be good for us to get clear about what do we mean.'

Once we started to notice distinctions in meaning then, the issue of how to make sense of or to relate to these distinctions arose.

'I'm hoping we can get to an 'and' rather than an 'or'. All too often in these discussions we have to prove to others that ours is the definition. And thereby all other definitions are wrong. Rather than thinking collectively and how differences might add together to a more powerful whole.'

The desire for consensus, however, itself began to bump into the difficulties associated with adopting a position of neutrality from which to consider the issues. The mini-debate that ensued developed as follows.

'If you are going to do that then you have to say that there's a legitimacy to, say, the side of the Klan, or there's a legitimacy to the side of Japanese internment. It implies the notion of a value-free education and I would argue that's an impossibility. Those are really thorny issues.'

'I think you can talk about, say, Japanese internment and you can ask the question about how people can be led to see this as a good decision. You don't have to agree or disagree. But can you see how a country might have come to this? Part of understanding those histories is understanding how you got there in the first place. And then you get the understanding that it was socially unjust to do so. To me

that's not as political. It's much more analytical.'

'But I would argue that you're still ending with a value judgment.'

No one seemed to dispute the idea of access to education being a basic principle of social justice. But there did emerge a questioning of whether this basic principle was sufficient.

'There's the notion that just because you have access to education doesn't necessarily mean that education is going to be emancipatory. There are certain countries that have "re-education" facilities where education is used in the exact opposite form as a mechanism of control.'

Emancipation was thus claimed as a goal of social justice. How to achieve such an emancipatory agenda was then engaged. Here is one participant who constructed it in terms of the accumulation of cultural capital (Pierre Bourdieu's, 1999, term).

'Where students connect with all of us outside of the classroom, there's also an invisible and almost intangible cultural capital that they walk away with and that can ultimately help stimulate their quality of life, stimulate change within their community. It is a ripple effect... All of their experiences are an opportunity to build cultural capital, let alone what they are learning in the classroom. So we want to talk about social justice because we want to talk about increasing people's cultural capital.'

The concept of cultural capital is something that schools are theorized by Bourdieu to be able to enhance but not to initiate. Families and communities have already contributed considerable cultural capital to children's lives

WISDOM IN EDUCATION – VOL. 5, ISS. 1

before they reach school. As one participant noted:

‘What students are bringing to their education is already not socially just. Because it is a term around which a social movement is being built.’

This was as far as the conversation about a vision of social justice got on this occasion. Clearly there are some differences that remain outstanding, especially the difference between a personal and a systemic/institutional vision of social justice. What remains to be tested is whether these differences are incommensurable. The conversation continued with attention to the opposite pole of defining what social injustice might be.

### What is social injustice?

Again a comment on the language world in which a term like ‘social justice’ lives begins the discussion.

‘First, any concern about the need for justice must be founded on an understanding of the opposite: injustice. Justice and injustice are what Derrida (1976) refers to as a binary pair. They rely on each other for their meaning. In other words we can’t define social justice without defining at the same time what social injustice might be.’

The (deconstructive) point here is that you cannot talk about social justice without at least a sense of what injustice is like and you cannot talk about injustice without at least an implicit vision of what greater justice might be like. Each concept is defined in terms of the other.

Next the distinction between the personal and the systemic perspective was resurfaced, this time with a third angle introduced in which the emphasis falls less on either the individual or the system and instead falls on the discourses that support both.

‘In American culture injustice is often individualized as personal discrimination, hate, privilege. Or on the other hand it is spoken about as an aspect of social structure, institutional structure. Both have their place. But I find more compelling the perspective that injustice is constructed out of assumptions built into discourse, language, or meaning systems and they manifest themselves in personal discrimination or institutional structures.’

The concept of dividing lines and dividing practices built around differences, drawing from Foucault (1980), was then introduced.

‘To define injustice we need to consider the major forms of difference. Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, age. But difference is not enough either to act as the basis for injustice. Not all differences are sites of injustice because not all differences are sources of social division around which life experiences are organized. For example people differ in terms of height but there is not a major social division around whether you are five foot tall or seven foot tall. Nor is eye color a major form of social division in itself. There is no major disadvantage in having green eyes. But some differences get selected out as dividing lines. Dividing practices build up around them. And then dividing practices get internalized in people’s heads. Injustice occurs when a group of people have diminished life opportunities as a result of no fault of their own, because they fall on one side of a dividing line. Social dividing lines produce groups of people who are made ‘other’. They are ‘othered’. From the point of view of those who

have the strongest say, they are marked as different. Other relevant concepts include ‘abjection’, ‘marginalization’.

Further elaboration of social justice shifted from educational access to educational outcomes.

‘What I’m concerned about in terms of education is the way in which some kids come out of school or university with a very strong story of, ‘I am capable, I am confident, I am learning, I am going somewhere in my life.’ And other kids comes out of school with, ‘I’m a failure, I am worthless, I’m good for nothing, what have I got to lose.’ And I don’t think that those stories they have internalized about themselves from the things they have experienced at school are usually to do with, say, Japanese internment camps. They are more to do with what the mainstream effects of education are and the way in which those people are spoken to and talked about and the things they internalize as the result of testing systems, and they lead to unjust and differential futures for those people. Those who come out with strong confidence are ready-made for what gets called ‘success’. And those that come out with a sense of failure are ready-made for, in the worst cases, prison. And that is not chance. It is not the intention of anybody. It is not the intention of good hearted, well-intentioned teachers. But it keeps happening. What concerns me is the way that keeps happening differentially for different groups of people.’

This perspective was qualified by the acknowledgement that schools cannot address all of the effects of the wider social world.

‘But there are many influences on young people and we can only do so much within our confines. There are homes and there is what they do in their free time and the people with whom they associate, all with significant impacts on whether they’re motivated or not. We don’t have to take all the responsibility for people through what we do.’

Next some of the specific sites of injustice began to be named. Race was one of the first to be named.

‘It’s useful to look outside America to see that what’s happening here is simply a particular choice that we’ve made about where the dividing lines are. They’re not essential. There’s nothing that said race had to be one of the major dividing lines in this country. It’s just that history created it that way. There’s nothing to say it would stay that way either. But it has been.’

Dividing lines on the basis of religion were mentioned but there was difficulty in reaching agreement on this.

‘If you don’t identify with Christian privilege, there are a number of consequences you pay for that in terms of social capital.’

‘I was raised in a kind of fringe religion and I have had direct persecution from that, because of the religious perspective my family held. So it does happen. What about children who are raised with abusive parents? They didn’t choose that.’

‘We have complaints as well with religion being a fact of discrimination here on campus. At the root of this is ... we need to have those difficult

dialogues. We need to go there and bring awareness of power and oppression and reflect on things we've never thought about and how they have an impact.'

It was interesting that these two sites of injustice were mentioned first, particularly in the light of their history as the two dividing lines that featured in the early history of the United States. It was the effect of dividing lines on the basis of religion in Europe that propelled much early European migration to the USA and at the same time the importation of sharp divisions on the basis of race were produced by slavery.

Then social divisions on the basis of economic positioning or social class were introduced.

'I'm a big proponent of the common core standards but if you really start to look at what those standards are directed towards, or who is in charge of educational reform, it's some kind of social adaptationist perspective. We need certain kinds of workers and the primary function of schools is to create workers. And we need some workers to do some jobs and other workers to do other jobs... It strikes me that so much of the discussion now is being couched in the terms of globalized competition and capitalist ideology. We have to compete with other people. And changing workforces.'

'If we are going to address those dividing lines ... you have to also include class ... Class certainly has a big impact on how schools are organized and what options students have once they finished them.'

'It would challenge the notion that the purpose of education is to serve democracy. That gestalt would suggest

that the purpose of education at Cal State is to serve capitalism, to serve the interests of those who hold capital. I think that's very different.'

'I think you could view education... and at different points in time it's been viewed in different ways as having a strong moral dimension, learning the Bible. Or as having a strong citizenship component. Or as bringing in immigrants ... into a common identity. Or you could see it as a liberating or consciousness-raising. You could see school as something you do to become more human ... But job skills and occupation is not the only purpose of schooling. I don't know if you can really have that discussion. I haven't heard that for a long time. For me it makes a lot of sense but for others, 'Hey, I've gotta put food on the table?'

The latter comment also makes a link between social class and immigration. Most immigrant groups have been assigned working class social positions, at least initially. There were other social dividing lines that did not arise in this particular conversation however. For example no explicit mention was made of sexual orientation and little about gender was referenced. Nor were age or disability mentioned. One might speculate as to why these issues were not picked up. Perhaps there were chance factors or perhaps in future weeks we might tease out why some things get overlooked less coincidentally.

### **What does social justice have to do with education?**

The final question discussed was focused on the relevance of social justice for education. Again the personal perspective was an early cab off the rank.

‘We cannot mandate social justice because it’s a personal thing within us all. It’s a moral and ethical and spiritual responsibility that we have to respect one another and to provide for those who are in need. And we find that throughout every religion in the world. But it’s got to be personal. So some way we have to find a way to influence persons within our profession, as we establish the culture of a school for example, that they need to be true to themselves and have mutual respect for everybody else.’

The debate between personal freedom and its limits, especially when it creates suffering or injustice for others, was joined however.

‘While I believe that’s great and certainly the end goal, to the extent that organizational behaviors, both hidden and explicit, are mandated ... for example if someone doesn’t want to teach an inclusive curriculum, the fact that a school district or a state or a principal says you will, or if the standards codify expressions of social justice, then teachers must. They may not be highly motivated but they still have to at some level go there. And that’s the importance of things like policies and planning.’

‘The teachers who are positive and care about kids, who teach to the standards but do not demean or insult any child, but draw things out from them ... to me social justice is treating all those children as individuals, for whatever they can contribute, and to help them grow to the next level. I believe a powerful teacher who believes in children can really have such an impact in bringing about what we want ... which is a fair and equal opportunity to learn.’

‘If you’re going to be an educator, your stuff comes out. And the injustice you’ve experienced as an individual is going to be a part of the interaction in the classroom.’

‘I can be kind, but I’m not necessarily doing social justice work. That’s a tension many of my teacher candidates have with a number of the standards in that they see them as highly politicized. And we have this conversation in class about ... if you are unwilling to teach in an affirming way about this particular form of diversity or about this aspect of history, can you still be an educator in a public institution? Or must you opt out?’

The simple acceptance of people’s conscious choices was then questioned with reference to the discourses which individuals are exposed to.

‘Getting at people’s rights of access to education is a battle that has occupied people for a long time. It was part of the civil rights movement, it was part of various pieces of legislation and court cases. And it has made a huge difference to many people’s lives. But it hasn’t addressed all of the issues of equality. So therefore we need to look beyond that and this is why education is important. What’s necessary to create differences in people’s experience of life and greater opportunity where they have had diminished opportunity is we actually have to get into people’s heads and change their mindsets. That kind of shift of mindset is necessary and education is one of the activities that does that. There are others like advertising and the media. But addressing the mindsets that are created by the way in which we talk

about people, and about families, and about work, many of which we do without thinking very much about what we mean. For example sexist language was a good example of talking in ways that guaranteed males privileged access to positions and made it more difficult for women to get access to those positions. If the word was ‘chairman’, no one ever thought that a woman could ever be chair of a committee. Making that shift in language opened up many possibilities that women have taken advantage of. And that’s an example not of a shift in rights, which are in the end legal. But a shift in thinking and in language. The role of education in social justice is to shift the way in which things are talked about so that people get different experiences of life and different opportunities. We have an opportunity in school to shape people’s mindsets in ways that are helpful to them or not so helpful. In many places they’re not so helpful and we need to be examining why that is.’

The suggestion here is that creating social justice is about creating shifts in discourse that then find their way into people’s consciousness and into patterns of living and institutional frameworks.

The conversation ended however with an appropriate story that one participant told. The story illustrated the production of social injustice quite aptly and encapsulated some of the themes that had been canvassed during the conversation.

I’ll go back to the thought of invisible vulnerability. Students come. They have hopes. They have dreams. They want to learn. And there’s this vulnerability. We as educators have a responsibility to really be intentional. I’ll use my mother as an example. She was an immigrant. She was an

exceptional student. She was tracked into going into beauty school. She did not obtain a college education. I asked her, “Why didn’t you pursue college?” She said, “Well, I didn’t have anybody to tell me better. And I trusted my instructors and counselors to advise me.” And that’s what she did. She became a beautician. And I think about my mother and I think about how her course in life would maybe have been different, had she had somebody who took the time to tell her, “You can do this. Have you thought about this route instead?” So it’s more than the responsibility we have to teach academically. Outside the classroom, how we interact with students, or that space or that minute where students come and ask you for advice, or counseling or guidance. Helping to create that space for an interaction can make a difference.’

### Discussion

While a brief discussion cannot resolve all of the differences in perspective, a wide range of perspectives were represented by participants’ contributions. It remains to summarize what emerged.

The first thing to stress is the idea that social justice in education is closely connected with participants’ conceptualizations of democracy, whether this conceptualization is focused on the production of a literate electorate or on the removal of barriers that interfere with citizens’ rights to have a say in their own lives.

It was argued that social justice needs to be based in an ethic of care for the harm done to people by injustice and in a principle of equality of treatment. To some, equality references primarily the right of access to education. To others access is only a starting point. What follows access to schooling is an equitable provision for educational outcomes. In order to achieve such equity, it might be necessary to look critically at the ways in

which schooling contributes to the production of injustice, with a view to correcting such situations. On the other hand caution was expressed about assuming that educational institutions can address all social ills. Social forces that operate outside of schools also need to be respected.

Groups of people, established by ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault, 2000, p. 326), who are recognized as victims of injustice deserve special attention in education for social justice. It was interesting that these groups arose in the conversation in an order that recapitulated American history since European invasion. Religious difference and race were the first two issues raised. Then social class and immigration were mentioned. Later in the conversation, equity in relation to gender was raised. Sexual orientation was barely mentioned and no reference was made to disability. There was importantly a brief allusion to the way in which social injustice is a product sometimes of specific, even quite local, events, rather than attributed to membership of a large population. For example children who are abused or subjected to violence experience very particular forms of injustice.

Young people in schools and universities nevertheless enter educational institutions with their own hopes and aspirations for their lives. Equitable education needs to engage with their dreams and avoid undermining them. It should not aim simply to adapt people to ‘realities’ (economic or otherwise) of the world. It was argued too that educators cannot be neutral with regard to injustice. A focus on social justice must emphasize an emancipatory agenda and actively seek to enhance the cultural and social capital that children/students bring to school with them.

Where powerful social discourses have been internalized into people’s consciousness in ways that limit people’s opportunities in life, education for social justice requires that educators engage in critique and challenge the internalized assumptions that limit

opportunity inside people’s heads as well as those barriers that exist in the world around them. Education may be said to be uniquely suited to this last task.

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