

Social Justice and Philosophies of Adult Education

The Meaning of Social Justice in Philosophy of Adult Education Theories

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Abstract: Societies include social classes or social groups with different levels of access to education, health care, housing, transportation, leisure, voting rights, freedom of speech and assembly, quality neighborhood, living wages, and other goods and services. Some people think that the gaps among groups are considered as resulting from individual efforts and drive. Others believe that unequal access to resources stems from structural and institutionalized exploitations of one group by another, thus argue for social justice. Many believe that education can help tackle the structures that are the root causes of social and economic inequalities, thus lead to social justice. However, education for social justice has mostly been considered in the perspective of young children and youth. What is the meaning of social justice in the context of adult education? Reaching social justice has been a challenge throughout the history of the American society and remains critical in adult education. This paper reviews the concept of social justice and provides an overview in terms of its meaning for liberal, progressive, behaviorist, humanist, radical, analytic, and postmodern philosophies of adult education.

Keywords: social justice, adult education, philosophy of education, education theory

1. Introduction

Education aims to nurture the citizens to improving social conditions, maintaining social control, and reducing social tensions that could eventually be caused by economic inequalities. In fact, there is a complex relationship between schools and societies, both at the macro level of the larger educational system and the micro level of teaching and learning. Many social phenomena, such as social mobility, academic achievement and educational attainment, occupational structure, and social stratification and patterns of inequality are playing in the field of the education system of a society. Kozol [1] has documented how the schools attended by the students provide them the means to replicate

their social class backgrounds, because of the way the school districts are financed. The wealthier districts are able to provide their schools with better resources for better chance of success. Many other studies have also underlined the issues of social reproduction, social-class differences, and inequality of opportunity in the American education system [2], [3]. People enjoy equality, both in the social and economic area and the equal rights to participation in public decision making processes, thus making the notion of social justice a constant discussion topic in the American society and education system, especially in regard to the social purpose of adult education [4], [5]. As Ryan [6] explained, there are various interpretations of the principle of social justice. For example, Rawls [7] envisioned social justice on

the basis of fairness. However, Hayek [8] argued that the notion of social justice is meaningless in a free society. What does social justice mean? How do theorists in adult education address this concept? In other words, to what extent the philosophies of adult education provided the foundation to address social injustice and educational disadvantages regarding the adult learner. I will attempt to answer these questions through an overview of liberal, progressive, behaviorist, humanist, radical, analytic, and postmodern theories of adult education.

2. Conceptual Framework: What is social justice?

The concept of social justice implies the existence of a society which is administered on the basis of fairness and just share of goods and services. Although left-wing and right-wing ideologies may use this differently and for their special purposes, the notion of social justice features generally speaking a society based on human rights and equality.

Social justice ideas emerged long time ago, especially during the European enlightenment of the 18th century. One can remember, for example, “The Social Contract” of Rousseau [9], where he stated, “The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone and remain as free as before. This is the fundamental problem of which The social contract provides the solution.”

Recent social justice approaches are rooted in the civil rights movements that used the concepts of oppression and liberation, in comparison to gap in social justice, to analyze discriminatory cultural practices and institutional structures. Some studies show that from 1920s to the present, there are social-class differences in many high schools [10], [11]. In fact, Gilbert and Kahl [12] explains that people can experience social exploitation, powerlessness, marginalization, violence, and cultural imperialism on the basis of their social group memberships and through social structural constraints that reproduce continuous social inequalities.

Social justice is also seen in the perspective of distributive justice. In this sense, it implies educational inclusion of groups and individuals to provide them the opportunities to develop the capabilities essential to living a fully human life. As Bell [13] argued, “individuals have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, their society, and the broader world in which we live”.

This is still a dream for many in today America. According to the U.S. Department of education, 21% of adult Americans are functionally illiterate [14]. This raises a serious question of social justice for adult education

theorists. This sends us back to the question, what is the meaning of social justice in adult education theory? The concept philosophy of adult education is used to refer to a comprehensive set of beliefs guiding the practice of adult learning and teaching. The analysis in this paper is inspired by the Elias and Merriam [15] framework (Table 1), which outlines the major philosophies of adult education: Liberalism, behaviorism, progressivism, humanism, radicalism, and philosophical analysis. The framework is expanded to include the postmodernism theory [16].

3. Social justice and liberal adult education theories

The liberal theory of adult education has its roots in the birth of the Western philosophical tradition with the Greek and Roman philosophers, such Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The aims were to develop, stimulate, and discipline the mind through the study of the universal principles of truth, beauty, justice, and goodness. The liberal education strived to stimulate the learner for the discovery of ideas that were present but latent in their minds. The ideal society in the light of Plato’s Republic would be governed by a philosopher-king and the intellectual elite. Aristotle’s Politics distinguished between liberal education and technical or vocational training, which he believed was a servile interference with intellectual development. Also, he thought that women were intellectually inferior, and should be trained for household and child-rearing duties. Therefore, this was not an education based on social justice, considering the notion of equal opportunity of access to education.

Although liberal education concerned mainly children and youth in the beginning, the adult learner has been lately integrated into the debate. Friedenbergl [17] for example argued that liberal education as a distinct function for adults, in the sense that it can free the individual and make a person competent to use that freedom.

4. Social justice and progressive adult education theories

One of the key figures of progressive education is Dewey [18] who believed that education should contribute to social reform and reconstruction. Dewey [19] argued that the school should be indirectly involved in this change, by providing the individuals the values needed for a democratic society. The notion of social justice in the light of progressive adult education theories can be traced through the programs of Americanization of education, the National Issues Forum program, and the Community Education Movement.

Table 1: Overview of philosophies of adult education

	Liberal	Behavioral	Progressive	Humanistic	Radical	Analytical	Postmodernism
Purpose	Mind development, General education	Competency development	Social participation	Personal growth	Social change	Reverse social change	Distrust of theories
Learner	Learn concepts and theories	Learn through behavior modification	Learner participation in learning	Learner motivation and self-direction	Equality between learner and teacher		Learn to challenge dominant worldviews
Teacher	The expert, the transmitter	Manager, controller	Organizer	Facilitator	Advisor		Cultural worker
Concept	Learning for its own sake, critical thinking	Standard, performance, competence	Problem-solving, active inquiry	Freedom, self-directedness	Social justice, praxis		Ongoing deconstruction and intuitive interpretation
Methods	Lecture, Q & A, teacher led discussions	Lock-step curriculum, demo & practice	Projects, portfolios, cooperative learning	Experiential learning, self-assessment	Critical discussions and reflections		Epistemology Deconstruction of absolute truths
Scholars, Practitioners	Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Piaget, Houle, Great Books Society	Thorndike, Watson, Skinner, Tyler, Mager	Dewey, Whitehead, Lindeman	Rogers, Maslow, Knowles, Tough, Boshier	Holt, Freire, Illich, Kozol, Ohliger, Perelman	Lawson	Derrida Heidegger Foucault Briton

Sources: Elias and Merriam (2005); Briton (1996).

The Americanization of education targeted the immigrants who came to the U.S. in the early decades of the twentieth century. The emphasis was to extend to them English programs, citizenship training, and instructions in work habits that will enable them to become vital forces of production for the capitalism system. Therefore, the aim was less for social justice than to strengthen the American capitalism. Training were provided through churches, settlement houses, factories, and other community and faith-based organizations. Although the attempt may be seen as an effort toward social justice, the results were different, since the Americanization of education benefited a small number of people [20].

Like the Americanization of education, the National Issues Forums and the Community Education Movements were contradictory in terms of the vision of social justice that they expressed and the practices that should lead to this end.

4. Social justice and behavioral adult education

theories

Behaviorist theories in adult education inspired from the European materialism tradition coupled with the scientific

realism and empiricism, and the positivism. Behaviorism theories promoted the view that the individual must acquire the appropriate skills to survive in a society. Therefore, the role of education is to provide the reinforcement to this end. According to Skinner [21],

What is good for the species is what what makes for its survival. What is good for the individual is what promote... Well being. What is good for a culture is what permits it to solve its problems. There are... other kinds of values, but they eventually take second place to survival.

Behavioral theories have influenced adult education through competency-based approach in vocational education, human resource development, literacy education, and continuing and professional education.

As opposed to the previous adult education theories mentioned, behaviorists were not looking for social justice per se. In fact, talking about survival implies a form of individualism that implicitly endorses inequality. In this sense, many scholars have been very critical about behavioral theories. For example, Collins [22] believes that behaviorism contradicts the humanistic view of the individual, and is inhumane.

5. Social justice and humanist adult education

theories

Humanist adult education theories could be traced from the western philosophical traditions introduced by Greco-Roman thinkers, such as Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Humanism believes in the freedom, integrity, and the potentiality of the individual. The humanist places the responsibility of the learning process in the hands of the students who have to assume responsibilities [23]. The teacher is rather a facilitator. Adult education becomes a transaction with the mission to transform the learner toward greater freedom. Also, by taking into account the characteristics and the needs of the adult learner, humanistic theories of adult education provide the foundation for more sustainable social justice. However, there is no specific claim for social and economic justice through humanist adult education theories.

6. Social justice and radical and critical adult

education theories

Unlike progressive and humanist theories that offer a reformist view of social change, radical and critical education theories provide the theoretical platform to advocate for radical change in societies. From the anarchists to the Marxist-socialist, and from the Freudian left to the feminists, the need to question and reshape the unequal social institutions and social structures was the continuing focus. One of the most influential theorists of the radical and critical school of thought was the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

For the radicals, social injustice can come from ignorance as well as from education [24]. The existing social system that is based on assimilation not only oppresses, but also dehumanizes people. The way out is to break the culture of silence, and engage in a conscientizational journey that can lead to liberation and social justice. Therefore, educating for the radicals is a political act that can humanize or dehumanize, depending on whether it aims for social justice or strengthen social inequalities. Freire [25], for example, proposed a “libertarian, dialogic, and problem-solving education”.

7. Social justice and analytical theories of adult education

Analytical theories of adult education have not developed a specific view on social justice. They are rather a critic of adult education theories, and to some extent reinforce the reformist perspective of social change. Lawson [26], for example, argued against the humanistic principle of student-centered education, and advocate for an education through the lens of the teacher. Also, Lawson [27] argued against all forms of political and community education. Rather than

being even reformist, this view sends us back to the traditional relations oppressor-oppressed, which forms the foundations of social inequalities in many societies.

8. Social justice and postmodernism adult

education theories

Postmodern theories are mainly challenging views of current adult education models or sets of assumptions [28]. Postmodernism challenges the modernism that inherits from the renaissance humanism and the Cartesianism. Postmodernism rejects all global worldview, whether it is the capitalism or the Marxism, whether it is the Christianity or Islamic fundamentalism, whether it is liberal democracy or modern science [29]. Because postmodern theories reject fix notions of knowledge, methods, and reality, it is very difficult to understand a postmodern view on social justice. Because of the ongoing deconstruction and intuitive interpretation that characterizes the postmodern thought, what could be considered as the meaning of social justice for postmodernists at a given point of time may be different at another time. In this sense, postmodernism is more an epistemological approach than a real set of interpretation of the world and knowledge.

9. Conclusion

What is the meaning of social justice in philosophies of adult education? This is the question that this paper attempted to answer. Starting from an overview of the concept of social justice, the paper summarizes the general understanding of the principles and practices of social justice through liberal, progressive, behaviorist, humanistic, radical and critical, analytic, and postmodern adult education theories. Except the radical and critical theories, most of the philosophies of adult education have either no specific perspective or a reformist perspective about the notion of social justice.

Although some theorists may disagree, the meaning of social justice in radical theories corresponds precisely to the needs of adult learners who are constantly exposed to the issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, ethnicity, and inequality. Social justice and the teaching of social justice is not the exclusive domain of politics. It involves peer relations and teacher-learner in the classroom, the designing and implementing of curriculum based on the dominant social discourse, the production and publication of books and textbooks that are feeding the assimilation and internalization of social reproduction of cultural and economic inequality, based on unquestionable global worldviews. In this sense, the existence of postmodern approaches may be helpful to support the use of critical principles in adult education practices.

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