RETHINKING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION: UTILIZING THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AS CATALYST OF IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

In a world bedevilled by social disparity in class status, economic sabotage, rising level of inequality, Social Justice and equity in education is the answer. The phrase "social justice" has become more mainstream in recent times, but it has existed for hundreds of years. Social Justice in education is about equitable distribution of resources and also fairly treating all students equitably so that they feel safe and secure both physically and psychologically within their learning environment. There is the need to rethink social justice and equity if the quest for global human harmony is to be attained Ensuring a comprehensive approach in quest of social Justice and equity entails creating and sustaining equal access and equal funding as well as equal opportunities for all. Until a visible and measurable effort is made in this direction, social justice and equity in education would continue to elude us. In the face of these, the teacher, the classroom, educational curriculum policy makers as well as researchers have pivotal roles to play in driving home the dream for the realization of a socially just and equitable society.
Keywords: Rethinking, Social Justice, Equity, School Environment, Teacher

Introduction

Social Justice stems from the word Justice. Justice as a term originates from the works of Plato as contained in his work "The Republic" and Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. Both philosophers saw justice as a social and political virtue which is crucial for the growth of any society. While Plato believed that justice would be achieved if each Greek city-state concentrated on its affairs and refrain from meddling in the affairs of others, Aristotle saw justice as having to do with the regulation of the state's rule to determine what is right or wrong

Social justice refers to a fair and equitable distribution of resource, opportunities, and privileges in society. The term Social Justice has its history in the religious background. It was first used in 1840 by Luigi Taparelli, who was an advisor to the Vatican. The term was used to make a case for the poor and disenfranchised people in the society. It sought to ensure that everyone was treated the same as others in the society. Later on, in 1945 the United Nations in its Charter and, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 embraced the term in its codification of human relations template. The term Social Justice became a frequent term in the 1960s and

promoted by the United Nations. According to Nancy Fraser, Social Justice can be categorized into three dimensions: Redistribution (of resources), Recognition (of marginalized groups), and Participation (of individuals and groups).

In his October 1932 paper titled "Letting Things Alone", the future president of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt, challenged the status quo which saw to "the survival of the fittest" at the expense of the struggling and vulnerable peasants. He advocated for "social Justice through social Action which should result in the protection of humanity (Taylor &Francis, 2024).

Understanding the concept of social justice in education and the Nigerian scenario

Social justice in education is a multifaceted concept that can be interpreted in various ways. Regardless of the specific interpretation, education plays a crucial role in fostering social justice and equity. According to Abdullahi (2021), social Justice in education is essentially focused on the creation of equal opportunities to learning and management of students' development potential. It is also concerned with the provision of basic needs and management of same for the students' development. The effective creation and management of opportunities, enabling atmosphere of students to learn and discover their full potential as well making adequate provision for full development of learners physically and mentally are key concerns of social justice in education.

Given the school setting as a bastion for ensuring equity and fairness, social justice in school environment can also be sustained when teachers are adequately prepared to harness the potential in the students to ensure their development. Unfortunately, Nigeria is grappling with series of social justice related issues such as poor resource distribution, arm conflicts and banditry, floods and high poverty level which has hampered a good number of school age children from enrolling into schools.

Education which constitutes an important criterion in measuring human development index, has also had its fair share of official or government neglect and abandonment in Nigeria (Ejitu N.O, Okechukwu F.N 2023) . Schools, books furniture, as well as quality teachers are all in short supply-triggering unequalled access and opportunities among learners across the different parts of the country. Consequently, millions of school-age children are out of school. Even those teaching in the school have low morale due to the neglect or total abandonment of their basic needs by their employers, whether government or private.

In the face of these prevailing challenges, it is imperative that a call up is made to re-access the status quo with a view to providing and ensuring that appropriate measures are taken to remedy the conditions. In view of these, the paper submits that despite the many challenges plaguing the implementation of social justice and equity, the school environment stands out as a veritable tool in achieving this. This position is held against the background that the school environment is the hatching ground for ideas and moral development for all future leaders. Through aggressive formation of character and inculcation of moral values, it is expected that learners would grow with a great sense of national patriotism and dedication. Ethnicity, religious bigotry, unhealthy sense of cultural superiority which are the main architects of discrimination among citizens would be checked.

Ways of Promoting Social Justice using the School Environment

One critical aspect of promoting social justice in education is by ensuring **inclusive education**. An inclusive education system aims to reduce disparities and create a more equitable environment. Part of the aim of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations by the year 20230 is that each child, regardless of his/her physical or social limitation is guaranteed access to education. The attainment of this goal would also guarantee social justice and equity as the common values that bind us as human beings would be promoted while artificial and accidental elements such as tribe, religion, race, geographical location, sex, would be de-emphasized.

Genuine inclusivity in schools involves welcoming diversity, fulfilling the right to quality education, and targeting both out-of-school children and those in school but not learning. According to Springer (2024), inclusive education goes beyond addressing only children with disabilities and other special needs. Inclusive education seeks to increase enrollment, attendance, and completion rates while reducing disparities and celebrating diversity. talking about inclusive education, one has to identify what constitutes inclusivity in education. Acknowledging the difficulty in arriving at comprehensive elements that would constitute inclusivity in education, citing Rittel and Webber (1973) Joanna, et al (2021), described such enigma as "Wicked Problem" to capture problems in education which tend to defy any form of solution as by nature it is complex and amoebic in content.

As good as inclusive education looks, it has its own setbacks and obstacles as well. Many education systems still struggle with large numbers of children who do not achieve minimum expected levels of learning. Factors contributing to exclusion include neglect, disinterest, discriminatory policies, lack of resources, and insufficient data on excluded populations. These factors can be based on migration status, conflict, natural disasters, income, linguistic or cultural differences, location, sex and ability.

In view of the setbacks to achieving inclusion of all learners, the researcher believes that adopting under-listed strategies will bring about its success. To create more inclusive schools, various policies and practices can be implemented:

Legislative Mandates and Whole-School Reform: Legal frameworks and comprehensive school reforms can promote inclusivity.

Targeted Responses: Address the needs of excluded groups through targeted interventions.

Pedagogies for Social-Emotional Learning: Strengthen teaching methods that celebrate diversity and promote social-emotional growth.

Inclusive Teaching–Learning Strategies: Implement approaches that encourage an open and dynamic use of the school environment as a tool for achieving social justice, educators can:

Curriculum Design: Integrate diverse perspectives, histories, and cultures into the curriculum.

Inclusive Practices: Foster an inclusive classroom where all students feel valued and respected.

Equitable Resources: Ensure access to quality resources, technology, and support for all students.

Anti-Bias Education: Address stereotypes, discrimination, and bias through discussions and activities.

Community Engagement: Connect learning to real-world issues and encourage activism

According to Sheldon Shaeffer (2019) In an ideal scenario, where external factors sustaining inequality are manageable, children leaving an inclusive education system should not only develop to their fullest potential but also contribute to local and national development, leading to a more just, equitable, and cohesive society.

Ways of enhancing classroom management towards attainment of social justice and equity

To achieve social justice and equity within the school environment, classroom management should take a primary space. This is because the classroom is the hallmark for entrenching traits that will inspire social justice and solidarity among citizenry. Furthermore, it is the ideal space to practice democracy which also serve as the courtyard for social justice and equity.The task of effective classroom management, one must admit, is a difficult one even though there are ample available research techniques advocated in ensuring social justice and equity. However, the researcher has identified some worthwhile practices which, when implemented, will bring about the realization of democratic social justice and equity within the school environment. The essential point is to create an enabling classroom situation that will foster equitable and democratic relationships among learners as well as between learners and teachers. These techniques include the following but

not limited to them:

Relationships

The first key element towards achieving a democratic society within the classroom would be to ensure that the class management style is deliberately made to be relational. This is because from all perspectives, effective attainment of a democratic classroom is heavily hinged on good relationships. Hence, creating sustaining relationship through positive connections with teachers and their students is the bedrock for its success. In doing this, it is important to let the learners know they matter through your actions. It is about carrying everyone along. Although results are important but the state of well-being of student should also be of importance. This can be achieved by means of showing interest in the lives of the students and what is happening in their lives. It begins and ends with showing emotional intelligence which seeks out the best in each learner. Actions such as welcoming the learners with a warm smile, engaging them in conversations that boost their morale, as well as making out time to know what happens to them outside the class or even the school is crucial.

Classroom culture

Students are products of their societal cultures, and hence, a good knowledge of the society in which they live apart from the school is critical. This is to be understood against the background of how the events and issues in their immediate environments impact the learners. A big part of creating an equitable classroom culture is to ensure we understand how many of the issues of the outside world impact the lives of our students. Issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and colonialism all impact students. When students are struggling or acting out in the class, we want to ensure that we do not merely react to the behaviour but instead compassionately respond to the root issues of how a student is acting out. With the many responsibilities we have as teachers, we can sometimes default into looking at our students through a deficit lens, which places the blame of misbehavior on them or we begin to seek out character flaws in students. On the other hands, an equitable educator should be responsive to the classroom environment and how that impacts certain students and also understand that many students are dealing with very serious issues outside the classroom.

Restorative Justice

By restorative justice, we refer to "an approach to justice which seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of the crime (Federal-Provincial- territorial Ministers Responsible for Justice and Public Safety, 2018). Engaging in acts of restorative justice therefore goes a long way to ensuring that the most difficult students feel that not only do they have to meet high expectations but that their teachers are also investing a lot in their success in the

class. Restorative justice can also offer opportunities for conflict between students to be settled equitably and have consequences that treat the student with dignity and respect.

Youth Voice and Democratic Classroom

Another way by which we can ensure democratic setting within the classroom is by creating the space for students to be able to voice out their interest and expectations. Therefore, it will not be in their interest and of course, the learning process if teachers maintain an authoritarian posture in dealing with their students within the classrooms. We cannot expect to be authoritarian in the school setting while we expecting our students to be democratic outside the school and in the society. The majority of teachers I've worked with over the years want our students to be engaged and contribute to their communities in a positive way. However, how can we expect students to become engaged and learn democratic citizenship skills if they are never required to practice this in schools? Schools should be one of the most important training grounds for a democracy and our classrooms management models can offer us a lot of hope.

Culturally Relevant and Engaging Lessons

Finally, one of my best classroom management strategies is to offer students lessons and learning opportunities that are culturally relevant, engaging, academically challenging and fun. If students see themselves in what they're learning they can easily make connections and see the importance of why they're learning about this. Although it must be admitted that achieving this can be quite challenging, yet it must not be denied that it is one of the most viable ways of entrenching social justice and equity in a given school setting. The way out is to develop curriculum that will ensure new possibilities where learners will see themselves playing key roles. It further requires the involvement of socially relevant and culturally impactful themes and topics to be covered by the curriculum. Such socially and culturally relevant values could be in form of music or art and plays. As a teacher, bringing in these tools and techniques within the learning space will go a long way in shaping the psyche of the learners in a more practical way. The bottom line for a teacher is to ensure that he or she sparks joy and love of learning in the classrooms by connecting teaching to the real lived experiences of youth.

Conclusion

Classroom management will never be an overnight success for any teacher. It requires a process of experimentation, building relationships and meeting the unique needs of each class you teach. The propositions made in this paper are by no means exhaustive. They are however meant serve as stimulus to for those teachers hoping to create a classroom built on the principles of equity and justice, it is hope that you have found the above strategies and ideas worthwhile. This is because, if we believe

in a different way of relating to young people then we have to re-imagine our role as teachers in the classroom. As teachers, we are therefore encouraged to give up the power and control and embrace an equitable relationship where both teachers and students can create successful and equitable classrooms together.

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