

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?
EDUCATIONAL SOLUTIONS
TO SOCIETAL INJUSTICE

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From the beginning of the 20th Century, John Dewey stressed democratic education practices in schooling. As a pragmatist, he viewed democracy as being ‘more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience’ (Dewey, 2009, p. 151). In reality, decreasing tolerance to diversity and respect for others’ rights in public spaces may hinder the ‘conjoint communicated experiences’ advocated by Dewey. Instead of interacting with ‘the other’ through collaboration and cooperation, we now face a world that is growing in populism, divisiveness, and injustice. Society, and educators, in particular, need desperately to reflect on our purpose and position in the world in all of its complexity, bring humanity back to everyday discourse, and think about the wider societal implications of our actions. Schools, as microcosms of the larger society, have reflected these societal trends and can also facilitate solutions to them by cultivating civic skills and providing space for civic participation for students in their classrooms.

An Educational Solution

Nancy Fraser's social justice model may help facilitate civic participation in schools in preparation for students engaging in civic life in adulthood. Fraser's framework is based 'on the principle of *parity of participation* [whereby] justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another *as peers*' (Fraser 2013, 164). Through (re)distribution, recognition, and representation, citizens may have a socially just public space in which to participate in civic life. Why limit social justice frameworks to adults? By applying a similar framework in schools, where students are considered 'citizens', they may also have the space to practice socially just interactions with others, thus preparing them for future adult life. Including students in civic participation within the school micro-society, the experience of 'doing' democracy may comprise an important building block of learning (Hess & McAvoy, 2015), giving students the necessary foundation for further application in larger public spaces in the future.

Nancy Fraser's framework consists of three intersecting dimensions: distribution, recognition, and representation (please see Fraser, 2007, 2008, 2013 for a complete explanation). When applied to an educational context, distribution can refer to what knowledge is distributed to others (students and staff), recognition is due to everyone, and everyone should have space to represent themselves (as holders of identity and knowledge). Where the domains intersect, social justice occurs. The different ways that this framework can be applied to education focuses primarily on large scale institutional or whole school applications (Vincent, 2019). Individual educators may also employ this framework within their classes through the promotion of student voice in content knowledge and knowledge distribution.

Student voice, in its simplest form, can be understood as the ability for students to express themselves and meaningfully participate in their education. This is essentially what Dewey called for when he referred to 'conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey, 2009, p. 151) in a democracy. Students are reminded that people are

affected by their interests, ideology, and bias; they are encouraged to listen to others with respect and tolerance as well as expressing their ideas (Chen & Yang, 2012). At an individual level, student voice could facilitate deliberative discussions that focus on reciprocity, the common good, and consensus while considering accountability (Chen & Yang, 2012). At the society level, the dialogues/deliberations could ease polarized societies by encouraging respect and not deriding contrary views, promoting an open instead of a closed mindset (Wong, 2021).

A word of caution: for many educators, the term 'student voice' suggests a student council. Young and Jerome (2020) have warned of the feedback loop whereby students provide feedback about policies, the educational environment, etc. The educational institution then listens and makes changes based on the feedback (or provides reasons as to why this is not possible) and informs students of the institutional response. Feedback and student voice are not synonyms. Feedback, although sometimes valuable as a tool for improvement, is expressing an opinion. Student voice is students actively participating in their educational

experience and contributing to knowledge construction and developing skills. Feedback may be tokenistic and may or may not be addressed satisfactorily by institutions. Student voice means creating educational experiences and knowledge that is then shared with peers and educators. The call here is for student voice to be incorporated into individual classrooms whereby students can receive recognition, be given space for the representation of their identities, and help to distribute their knowledge to others. In this way, students and staff can engage with each other and 'the other' that is present in many classrooms and schools as a result of globalization, in democratic and socially just ways.

Using the curriculum as a 'base' document, students can insert themselves into the pedagogical planning process. This will allow for 'collective decision making, to be determined by the citizens [in this case, students] themselves, through democratic deliberation' (Fraser, 2007, p.28). Students, along with educators, are able, with guidance from the curriculum document, to decide what knowledge is to be taught and how students are to receive

recognition as knowledge holders in the education process and have the space to represent themselves therein.

From a practical standpoint, this framework may be implemented in classes by involving students in the pedagogical content of their classes. Educators may begin lessons as they normally would, however, some space in the middle or toward the end of each semester may be left for 'open' classes that could be planned and taught by the students to the educator and their peers. Working in small groups, students can refer to the outcomes of the class, and collaboratively decide on a topic that meets those outcomes and that is also considered important to them. Working in groups may promote respectful dialogue with others, being open to new ideas, collaborating with 'the other' productively, developing critical thinking skills, knowledge generation, etc. To ensure educator guidance is available when needed, the educator can designate in-class time for this planning. Students may then be able to redistribute their knowledge to peers and the educator, receive recognition of their backgrounds/identity groups, and have the space for representation in influencing the content

being explored in their classes. Sharing the power in course creation with students is the prerequisite for the above goals to be realized (please see Briffett Aktaş, 2021 for further pedagogical application of Fraser's framework in the classroom). Educators and curriculum documents are no longer the sole sources of knowledge in schools. Rather, distributed knowledge and decision-making allow for multi-directional processes of learning between educators and students (Heggart, 2020).

Shuffling the power structure allows for the majority and minority to connect with schooling that may otherwise not be possible. Realistically, such a model can be applied quite easily without the need for bureaucratic or structural changes. All that is needed is the will of the educator and students to participate in course creation that is specific to each class. Promoting student voice when planning topics to be covered requires an open dialogue with students and an understanding of what student voice is and entails from the educator. Of course, power structures within education are firmly cemented in many schools and education systems. Educators may enjoy the power they hold and sometimes be

unwilling to acknowledge the awareness of the world held by their students. This is to be expected. Educators are people who may hold their laissez-faire attitude dearly, not wishing to 'upset the apple cart' with new ideas that threaten their hold on knowledge monopolies. Educators have a responsibility, however, to prepare students for life after formal education has concluded, including preparation for respectful civic engagement.

Meanwhile, the current crisis provides opportunities for educational institutions to rethink the purposes of education and help facilitate the solution. By not preparing students for future civic engagement, it is expected that the necessary skills are underdeveloped. How can society expect liberal democracy to thrive when students coming out of secondary schools, vocational training institutions, and universities, have no experience of participating in democratic processes? Democracy is learned and democratic attitudes and relations are practiced. Dewey called for democracy in education more than a century ago. How much slower we will be on the uptake? Let us give students space to learn about and practice democracy through the

promotion of social justice and student voice in classrooms by participating in pedagogical planning. Adopting such practices may prepare students for further political engagement later in life, thus giving them the tools to promote justice, inclusivity, respect, etc. in society.

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