

Participatory Social Justice for All

Aydin Bal

University of Wisconsin-Madison

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My personal and professional experience in non-dominant communities helped me to see the role of critical social justice theory as a means to understand and address lasting outcome and opportunity gaps that those communities experience. I grew up in a low-income working class family. Both of my parents had severe orthopedic disabilities. Each had more than ten orthopedic surgeries due to gradually declining physical capabilities and accumulated effects of physical disabilities. They did not have a formal education and were illiterate. By the age of eighteen, my family had moved more than thirty times between houses and cities. Moreover, my parents belong to a religious minority group that has been politically and economically marginalized and subjected to social violence and discriminatory practices for centuries. In short, from the conventional perspective, I was a living embodiment of the “at risk” student category for academic failure.

In Turkey, an economically developing country, being poor was hard. But having a disability, being illiterate, and coming from a non-dominant marginalized group interactively made my family’s life harder based on how Turkish society and government were organized. Almost all of the instances in my memory about my parents being disabled, illiterate and poor involve other people in a social event. Those events could be as ordinary for my parents as taking a daily bus trip to work, voting in a general election, or attending a parent-teacher meeting, or asking for services that were officially designated as their basic rights such as physical accommodations. In such instances, where I remembered feeling my parents were disabled, those aspects of their life were used to degrade them, insult them, silence their voices, or exclude them because of how they looked, talked, or acted or what they demanded as their rights. I do not remember my parents as being incapable in any physical, intellectual, and social interactional tasks in a gathering with family and friends. But

in social and bureaucratic events where the other people and institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals, police) made the differences that my parents and our family had more visible and where my parents were asked to be invisible and silent. Depending on the situation or what was at stake (e.g., their children's education, their employment), my parents complied with what the others and the situation dictated. But in some instances, they resisted how they were positioned negatively and excluded from certain social activities and rights. In those instances, they eventually got either what their rights were in the first place (e.g., respect, power, status, and a voice) or punished and further marginalized socially or institutionally. In short, their/our/my life, struggles, needs, strengths, and achievements could not be understood by only focusing on what they individually could or could not do. It is necessary to situate my parents and others efforts to reach their goals in enabling or disabling interactional contexts where individual, institutional, political, ideological, and economic factors are collectively negotiated and orchestrated.

In the majority of my adult life, I have worked with youth from historically marginalized communities who were experiencing social and behavioral difficulties in and outside of schools. My professional training in special education and psychology required me to identify as efficiently as possible what is "special" about a child's mind and/or behaviors. I was being trained to look for what is wrong with/in a child. However, my first-hand experience showed the possibilities of understanding academic, psychological and social difficulties that children experience in relation to their interactions with other people in schools, hospitals, and juvenile correctional facilities in which the children find themselves. During my graduate program, I volunteered in social justice organizations such as the Amnesty International. I worked with refugee families in their resettlement in the US. Specifically working with a group of refugee youth, Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan, opened

up my mind about the complexity of voices, experiences, and strengths in non-dominant students and communities. Young members of the Dinka, Nuer and other indigenous tribes of Southern Sudan who identified themselves as the Lost Boys and Girls became child casualties of the world's one of the longest-running civil war. In the mid-1980s government troops and government-backed Muslim militia from Northern Sudan attacked their villages. Thousands of children, many less than seven years old at that time, saw their families killed and their villages destroyed. These young children ran away leaving behind the security of their village life, adult guidance and the love of family. Approximately 30,000 war orphans began a journey that took them more than a thousand miles through three countries in search of safety. More than half of these children died from starvation, disease, and attacks by wild animals and armed forces. Those who survived ultimately reached the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya where they spent the next ten years. In 2001, nearly 4,000 Lost Boys and 89 Lost Girls came to the US in what became the nation's largest resettlement of unaccompanied minor refugees.

The Lost Boys Center asked me to develop an educational and behavioral health program as the Lost Boys and Girls were increasingly struggling with psychological disorders, educational problems, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system. In the beginning, whenever I interacted with the Lost Boys and Girls, as a well-trained special educator and psychologist, I was constantly in search of trauma-related symptoms such as emotional numbness, flashbacks, hopelessness about the future or memory problems and possible effects of those symptoms in their activities that I thought determined social and academic problems they experienced in the US. As I gained a better understanding of their individual and collective histories, I realized that their lives and struggles were way too complex and could not be captured through individual

manifestations of traumatic stress reactions. Under extremely harsh circumstances those refugees have found innovative ways to use physical and social resources around them; formed a transnational social support network and looked after each other and their extended families in Africa. They had to adapt to ever changing physical and sociocultural contexts and mastered survival skills such as defending themselves against soldiers, militia, wild animals, famine (e.g., eating wet mud to survive), building shacks and running small businesses selling cigarettes or other goods to adults who lived in the Kakuma refugee camp. In the US, the Lost Boys and Girls have engaged in political activism for the independence of South Sudan, raised public awareness toward the human rights violations in Sudan, and created bridges between people of South Sudan and governmental and non-governmental organizations in the US.

There is no doubt that Lost Boys and Girls' refuge experience was traumatic and some of them were dealing with psychological and educational problems that were real and disabling. However those problems were not free from the sociocultural, political, and economic conditions that they found in the US, a highly stratified society along the lines of race and class. The Lost Boys and Girls were placed in inner-city neighborhoods. Those impoverished and highly segregated urban neighborhoods offered extremely toxic living environments for its non-dominant residents, racial minority families as well as the newly arrived immigrants and refugees (Anyon, 2005). The more time immigrant and refugee youth spend in the US, the worse socio-economic, educational, and physical health-related issues they encounter (e.g., obesity, cardiovascular issues, or substance abuse) (Suarez-Orozco, Rhodes, & Milburn, 2009). As African refugees, the Lost Boys and Girls encountered social and institutional prejudices in their daily lives. As they walked on the street, soda cans and racial slurs were thrown at them. Their interactions with police and the legal system were

always challenging because of their collective negative history with people in uniform, their inexperience in the workings of the legal system, and deep seated institutionalized racism in the US. Several of them had jail time due to some minor offenses (traffic violations) and dealt with police brutality. They did not have access to any proper health care for mental and physical health issues resulted from living as refugees or child soldiers (e.g., missing limbs, traumatic brain injury). The US government did not provide an adequate financial, social, health-care, and educational support program that could help this refugee group and the practitioners (teachers, social workers, and police) who worked with them. Young Lost Boys and Girls were identified with speech and language disabilities and social skills problems in schools without any acknowledgement of the structural barriers they found in the US as African refugees, even though each could speak 3-4 languages, lived in more than four countries and adapted to diverse cultural communities in those countries. On the other hand, a majority of the Lost Boys and Girls were doing well working two to three low paying jobs, looking after their families in the US and Africa, and putting themselves through technical colleges or universities. How could I, as a practitioner, explain Lost Boys' and Girls' struggles solely based on symptoms of individual psychological disorders and design a support program without considering their active social agency, resilience, and the historical, institutional, and sociocultural contexts, which those refugee youth found themselves in?

Intersection of race, class, and ability

In the US education system race and social class have been interlocked in complex ways to maintain lasting negative educational and socioeconomic outcomes for historically marginalized racial minority youth from low income-families such as lower academic achievement and higher drop out rates (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Moreover, if we look at the intersection of race, class, and ability, we see that those disparities are exaggerated for

non-dominant students. Minority students (e.g., African-American, Native-American, and Latino) are overrepresented in special education for more subjective- high incidence- disability categories such as behavioral disorders or learning disabilities that are made up of almost 70% of all students in special education. Once in special education, minority students are placed in more restrictive settings outside of the general education and have lower post secondary outcomes compared to their peers (Losen & Orfield, 2002). Historically marginalized students are also disproportionately subjected to exclusionary school discipline and severe punishments such as mechanical restraints (e.g. being strapped down) (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2012).

The dominant deficit-oriented perspectives in educational sciences explaining those disparities by individual risk factors associated with non-dominant cultural practices and environments are sunk into the social psyche of our society. For example, students from privileged racial, social, and economic backgrounds who benefited from unequally distributed educational opportunities throughout their lives explain their success with their hard work, higher motivation and intelligence (Kozol, 2005). Privileged students did not acknowledge the structural and social opportunities such as highly trained teachers, positive, safe, and academically rich school climates, challenging curriculum, high expectations, extra curricular activities, and privileged cultural capital, which they and their families have unequally benefited from generation after generation. Privileged students may perceive that schools provide a fair race field in which they become more successful because they have superior moral and intellectual qualities.

Deficit-views toward racial, economic, and linguistic minority students also dominate teacher education programs and educational research. Being white and coming from middle and high-income levels have become the norms against which anyone or any cultural groups

are represented as missing moral, intellectual, psychological and social qualities. A random search of introductory level special education textbooks can attest to this point. In those textbooks, culture is associated only with minority people and their differences become more visible. Usually there is one chapter about cultural and linguistic diversity. In the rest of the textbook one finds theories of learning, development, and ability and instructional practices as if the information is culture-blind and universal. The diversity chapter usually mentions minority students' and families' different values (e.g., collectivism) and characteristics (e.g., learning styles, making eye contact etc.) in an essentialist way as if those groups are homogenous and their practices and values do not change. The chapter may also include the information about outcome disparities and how to work with minority families in "culturally responsive ways" so that minority families and students can cooperate with the school's expectations, rules, and practices. Our schools and teaching practices are already culturally responsive toward views and practices of dominant social class who are white, middle class, protestant, heterosexual, and without disability (Banks & Banks, 2007). This has important implications in the lives of non-dominant students. Non-dominant minority students' ways of knowing, behaving, and being are often devalued. So academic identities of minority students may be constructed as disruptive, resistant, outcast, and unlikely to succeed in schools (Wortham, 2006). Another important implication of the deficit-perspectives for non-dominant students is that they can also internalize the dominant value system of the school that marginalizes them. Minority students see themselves and the others from non-dominant minority backgrounds negatively through the social mirror of the dominant group.

Without a critical examination, educators and researchers from non-dominant racial and linguistic groups and social class can very well engage in practices and theories that are inept to understand complex life experiences, perspectives, and strengths of non-dominant

students and communities as situated in larger social, historical, and cultural contexts. As students, families, schools, and communities embrace the waves of diversity that surge through our schools, future practitioners and researchers need to develop a critical social justice perspective through which cultural, linguistics, and ability differences are not just valued but also used as resources for forming more effective learning contexts for *all* students.

In what follows, I present a participatory social justice perspective that I have appropriated based on my personal and professional experiences. Participatory social justice focuses on outcome and opportunity disparities on the ground of differences in race, ability, and class but it goes beyond that: Participatory social justice honors the complexity and diversity in the lives of non-dominant students and explores the social, cultural, historical, and institutional processes that produce and maintain those outcome disparities and socially unjust spaces where minority youth and families from non-dominant racial, economic, linguistics, and ability groups are excluded and negatively positioned through deficit-oriented views.

Beyond Outcome Disparities: Participatory Social Justice for All

The most common definition of social justice is based on the idea of distributional equality. A *fair* distribution of goods and resources such as food, health care, education, and other social services among all people, specifically for the benefit of the weakest members of the society is the main concern (Rawls, 1999). It is definitely vital to focus on the surface of inequalities. However, with an exclusively outcome-oriented focus of this distributive justice perspective, the structural and sociocultural processes, such as the racialization of ability and systemic exclusion of minority students and families, which produce inequalities in the first place, are not challenged.

The outcome-oriented distributive justice sees policy level changes and educational reforms as solutions to inequalities. Such initiatives include racial desegregation and inclusion of people with disabilities ordering the *de jure* integration of public schools on the basis of separate is not equal. The top-to-bottom initiatives are essential and necessary for addressing social injustice. But they are not sufficient since policies often ignore the unfairness of the enduring sociohistorical processes. If we stay at the outcome level and hope the fair policies will solve inequalities in our society, we may face a danger of making the unjust processes reproducing the outcome disparities invisible and further reinforce the deficit-oriented perspectives toward non-dominant groups because of continuing negative outcomes that non-dominant youth with disabilities experience even after those changes were enacted. For example, racial desegregation in schools was a morally right and socially just action. However, both in terms of the immediate and long-term results of racial desegregation, racial minority students and communities were negatively affected. In the more immediate term, formerly all black schools were closed, students were moved into all white schools with better facilities, and African-American teachers, administrators, and families lost their status and influence over the education of their children. African-American students in the newly desegregated schools were disproportionately placed in segregated remedial education programs for more subjectively identified disability categories such as mild mental retardation within in the “inclusive” schools. In the long-term, today schools are more segregated than they were 50 years ago. The majority of racial minority students are educated in majority-minority urban school districts that are not properly equipped for providing high quality educational opportunities (Kozol, 2005).

Similarly, the enactment of federal law P. L. 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975-now Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

(*IDEA*), was implemented to address discrimination against people with disabilities whose right to access equal educational and social opportunities had been historically denied. While this was an important achievement nationally and internationally, *IDEA* has not produced intended academic and social outcomes for minority students placed in special education. Special education placement that is meant to allocate appropriate services and resources for children with disabilities may also stigmatize students, segregate them from their peers, expose them to low expectations and a weak curriculum, and limit post-school outcomes such as employment options, income level, access to higher education and life satisfaction (Losen & Orfield, 2002).

In participatory social justice, justice is not an abstract notion of being fair or something “handed down” by educational reforms, it is a shared responsibility of people in the socially unjust systems they inhabit and reproduce (Soja, 2010). Social justice is not a static state but a continuous collective struggle. In other words, whatever we do or do not do in our daily lives has real implications in the lives of the others who possess less power since our actions can either challenge or reproduce socially unjust processes that start from our lives. Therefore, I propose participatory social justice as an alternative to distributive justice that can challenge educational inequalities such as racial learning opportunity gaps or disproportionality.

Participatory social justice requires two simultaneous actions: Critically exploring outcome and opportunity disparities as well as exploring and working against the processes producing and maintaining those long-lasting outcome and opportunity disparities. This view gives us tools not only to understand, but also to address inequalities and complex and adaptive educational issues such as disproportionality. The participatory social justice perspective also demands a paradigm shift: *Disability is a sociocultural construction*. More

specifically, shifting conceptions of disability, from an individually held defect or pathology to an understanding of how people, cultures, and societal institutions construct or contribute to reactions, treatment, and understandings of people with disabilities necessitates wider participation in efforts to create beneficial change. As Eldridge Cleaver put it, "you're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem."

Sociocultural View of Disability

A blind person will remain blind and a deaf person deaf, but they will cease to be handicapped because a handicapped condition is only a social concept ... Blindness by itself does not make a child handicapped... This is a sign of the difference between his behavior and the behavior of others (Vygotsky, 1993, pp. 83-84).

Disability is not just about people lacking a general pervasive mood of happiness, sight or hearing. It is about disabling power in/of a culture in which certain differences are recognized as moral, intellectual, or medical borders. And it is about how those differences are made consequential by degrading some people and preventing them from access to certain spaces and positions and participating in certain activities. McDermott and Varenne (1998) summed up that it takes a whole culture of people, their institutions, and economy and political arrangements of positioning and untiringly recording people and their actions as failures and disabilities. And the US schools are very well organized to label and disable.

The cultural infrastructural work of disability often goes unnoticed. The sociocultural processes such as classification of students based on ability and tools and assumptions (e.g., cultural difference as deficit) governing those processes are institutionalized and naturalized; hence invisible. Sociocultural view does not imply that disability is not real. Rather, it means that disability is not an individual property but a matter of social structure in which the other social constructions such as race come into play to determine the educational outcomes and

opportunities. Sociocultural theorists suggest it is one kind of problem to have a behavioral range different from social expectations or use a wheelchair; it is another kind of problem to be in a culture in which other people use that difference for degradation and exclusion from full participation. The latter problem is the worse (Varenne & McDermott, 1999).

My definition of participatory social justice aims at appreciating complexity of lives, experiences and identities of non-dominant cultural groups and how individuals use and make cultures either to enable or constrain students. This definition is a seemingly simple one, but it can be extremely challenging specifically for educators as it requires a critical exportation of what is conventional or normal so that we can challenge the well established theories and methods of teaching, learning, and performing for teachers and students. Our training and practice in education, specifically in special education, has an extreme focus on finding what is wrong with a child. Instead of asking what is wrong with a student who brings underprivileged cultural, linguistic, and ability differences and struggle in schools, the question ought to be how and why certain differences are identified and made consequential in that specific school culture for that child. We should explore why and how the certain academic and social opportunities, privileges, and positions are made available for some students in local schools as well as the US education system along the lines of race, language, and social class.

Participatory social justice aims to proliferate pluralism in schools not melting away of differences. As Young (1990) stated, social justice demands “institutions that promote reproduction of and respect for group differences without oppression.” Democratic schools with inclusive social climates can promote social justice depending on the degree to which all stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, families, and communities) are included in the decision-making and problem solving processes and have the opportunity to influence the outcomes

(Bal, 2011; Bal, King Thorius, & Kozleski, 2012). Socially just democratic schooling is not about “valuing” different cultural groups with different abilities or disabilities so that those students and their families can better adapt to conventional ways of speaking, writing, thinking, and being, but challenging and transforming those monolithic and exclusionary educational practices that are designed to be perceived as natural, reasonable, wiser, and normal. Rather, it should be about using cultural, linguistic, and ability differences that non-dominant students and families bring to schools as resources to design expansive learning environments for all students, not just for minority students.

Decades of special education research show us that programmatic inclusion of students with disabilities into general education is socially and academically beneficial for both students with disabilities and students without disabilities. Moreover, two-way bilingual education programs are beneficial for bilingual students as well as monolingual English speaking students. The current global economic system demands a workforce that can navigate across multiple cultural and linguistic spaces, function under uncertain ever-changing situations, and closely work with people with different backgrounds. Therefore, a commitment to preparing well-rounded citizens of a global world makes it counterintuitive to force diverse students who are able to orchestrate multiple cultural practices, demands, and differences to assimilate into monolingual and monocultural schools that are dysfunctional. Utilizing complex life experiences, voices, and cultural practices that non-dominant students and families bring to schools as invaluable educational resources that are beneficial for learning and development for all students must be a core responsibility of the US schools.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argue for a critical view of participatory social justice for reframing educational inequities that non-dominant students experience in schools (e.g., disproportionality). The socially unjust outcome disparities are the tip of an iceberg. They are symptoms of larger structural processes that marginalize and exclude non-dominant students and communities at the intersections of race, class and ability. Social injustice is not a natural order but a sociocultural process reproduced through daily work and interactions of people, institutions, and ideologies; hence it is open for change via concerted social action from the ground-up. My view of social justice deals with the formation of inclusive democratic educational institutions in which diversity is valued and used for facilitating high quality learning opportunities and positive school climates for *all*.

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