4 Historical and Critical Interpretations of Social Justice

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The term social justice seems to be in the ears and on the lips of educators who set as their task the fostering of a more democratic society through classroom practices. While generally well intended, the ways in which different educators go about defining social justice, and acting from those definitions, differ greatly. As a result, contradictory efforts emerge under the heading of social justice. With a diversity of meanings comes a diversity of understandings; and while diversity is necessary for a more democratic education, our goal is to help clarify the history and background of social justice. In doing so, our aim is to reveal the points of contestation over such competing definitions and to explore some of the ideological assumptions of the cultural and political interests from which specific parties operate. In other words, by providing an historical background to the concept of social justice we intend to bring into critical relief those underlying assumptions from which social justice proponents argue. Ultimately, engaging a critical history of social justice will provide a background to which and foundation from which educators interested in teaching for social justice can better interpret their own viewpoints in and among other positions.

The concept of social justice in education indicates that schools and society are, and always have been, replete with injustice. Some proponents of social justice see the term’s enactment in our current meritocratic system of education. Other proponents understand it as directly opposed to such individualistic ideologies, encouraging instead a public education system that addresses the social inequities present in an already unjust society. This chapter understands public education as critical to engaging individuals as agents for social change in a participatory democracy complete with dissension, restructuring, and change. As such, this history of social justice in education addresses the shifts and differences in meanings this concept has undergone to better situate current debates calling for social justice in education. Said differently, there are groups promoting educational reform in order to perpetuate status quo norms of power and privilege acting in the name of social justice. Yet, and at the same time, there are other groups who wish to dismantle such privilege under the auspices of social justice.

Classical Ideas of Justice

The different ways social justice is understood today can arguably be traced to their foundation in Plato’s Republic, where Socrates questions what is meant by justice (Plato, 1991). Certainly many of the meanings and foci of justice have altered since antiquity, but in readdressing the idea of justice, and more specifically social justice, educators may encounter many similar problems as those found in and made by the Republic. Initially, Socrates and his interlocutors define justice as helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies. As quickly as the definition is given, it is dispensed with because of the capabil-
ity for one’s friends to be unjust themselves. Examining the making and refuting of definitions of justice, Socrates decides to build his famous city in speech, *kallipolis*, in order to see the origins of justice and injustice writ large in civic life. In *kallipolis*, Socrates describes justice in terms of proportion according to a tripartite system of the appetites, passions, and reason. For Socrates, justice is achieved when the appropriate balance between these things, in the city-state and the soul, is maintained. After constructing the city, Socrates and his interlocutors spend the entirety of Book VII discussing the education necessary to maintain justice within the walls of *kallipolis*.

Plato sets his famous allegory of the cave as the stage on which education must act. The people within the cave are shackled, forced to watch a play of shadows on a wall. One of the prisoners looses his shackles, turns to see a blinding light, and realizes all these shadows before him are mere appearances—the light is their source. After traveling to the light, the freed cave dweller is compelled to return to the cave to release his fellow prisoners, so they, too, may see the light behind the shadows.

Plato ultimately argues that an aristocracy is the government that best provides education for the cave dwellers. While this chapter supports democracy over and above aristocracy, it is important to note such an early link between education and freedom (and the return to the cave as an act of justice) in order to develop a history of social justice in education without positing the emergence of such a concept ex nihilo. This also serves as a primary point for any history of social justice in that it takes as problematic any nostalgic look backwards to some mythological golden age of justice. In terms of this chapter’s focus, we may say more specifically that any present day harkening back to such authoritarian ideals of justice, when done in the name of democracy, is suspect in its aim. Plato and Socrates are invaluable to the discussion of justice, but it is not the intent of this chapter to uphold an unchanging, eternal, or ahistorical notion of justice. As a corollary to problematizing an ahistorical rendering of justice, the use of the *Republic* as a starting point for a history of social justice should not be read as though Plato was a proponent of social justice. The actual concept is fairly recent in history, and unavailable to classical discussions of justice. The rise of social justice as a novel and unique idea is outlined below, but its conception emerged from inquiry into the meaning of justice. To this end, the *Republic* stands as Western society’s first thoroughgoing treatment of justice and its involvement with education.

Picking up from Plato’s discussion of justice in the *Republic*, Aristotle wrote extensively on the topic. His approach in the *Nicomachean Ethics* seeks to understand justice in its constituent parts. One key distinction he makes in kinds of justice is justice as distribution. This is important to note because distributive justice is often associated, if not conflated, with social justice by some contemporary writers. The relationship between social and distributive justice is addressed in its current formation more fully below. Aristotle, like Plato, did not have the idea of social justice available to him, but his coining of distributive justice has had much influence on proponents of social justice.

Justice as distributive, Aristotle explains, centers on property; for example, honors, wealth, and other material goods (Aristotle, 1999). Drawing upon a proportional sense of justice, as described above, distributive justice is the median between four terms: two people and the share belonging to each. In its mean, the share of property belonging to each person forms a ratio equal on both sides. Aristotle formulates, “Therefore, \(A:B = c:d\) and, by alternation, \(A:c = B:d\). It also follows that one whole, (i.e., person plus share,) will stand in the same ratio to the other (whole, as person stands to person). This is the union of terms that distribution (of honors, wealth, etc.) brings about, and if it is effected in this manner, the union is just” (p. 119). Deviation from this ratio, in Aristotle’s view, creates an unjust act, therefore injustice, where one person is afforded more than his or her just
share and the other less than his or her just share. Important to this formula is its stress on property. The shares that belong to a person are either material, for example, wealth, or immaterial, for example, honors, but both are things which can be given or taken away; that is, distributed. While the giving and taking of material things is straightforward, those things that are immaterial, under distributive justice, must be reified, assumed as material, in order to understand them first as property and second as something that can be given and taken away. We bring this criticism to bear in full against contemporary notions of distributive justice later in this chapter. The point worth noting here is the tendency of definitions of distributive justice, as early as Aristotle’s, to make immaterial things, such as performance and opportunity, more concrete by understanding them as quantifiable properties which can be distributed equally or otherwise.

The Rise of Social Justice

The idea of the social was never linked to justice in classical thought. The same holds for medieval thought. In fact, one of the largest figures of the Middle Ages, St. Thomas Aquinas, mostly appropriated Aristotle’s thoughts on justice for a Christian theological perspective, distinguishing justice, along with Aristotle’s distinctions, from charity and stressing its legalistic qualities. If we follow Hannah Arendt’s view, the concept of the social is something that arose out of modernity, after the Classical and Middle Ages (Arendt, 1998). Society, on her view, is the result of the collapse of classical distinctions between public and private realms into the modern notions of the social and the intimate. Corroborating this point is the first use of the term social justice in 1840 by a little-studied Jesuit priest, Luigi Taparelli.

Taparelli took issue with the influence of Cartesian doubt during his lifetime. His concern was directed toward the ongoing unification of Italy. Should the radical doubt of Descartes, popular at the time, influence Italy’s formation as a country, Taparelli foresaw the role of private interests dominating public integrity (Behr, 2003). In other words, a philosophy that values isolated reflection and doubt of everything outside of one’s self necessarily leads, on Taparelli’s view, to the valuing of one’s own interests over and above any common interests which were always capable of being doubted. As a response, heavily steeped in Thomist philosophy, Taparelli composed a theory of society that focused on the relationship between authorities and subjects in various levels of society (Behr, 2003). Simply put, society is composed of other, smaller societies. These smaller societies, for example government and citizen groups, function to assist the common good of societies larger than them and so on until society at large is working toward the common good. As Behr (2003) notes, “help in this context is from the bottom up, not from the top down, as the inferior, mediating groups all participate in achieving the common good of the more perfect association” (p.105). Thus, social justice, as first defined by Taparelli, is achieved in a society ordered in this way so as to “[maximize] individual freedom to associate at all levels” (Behr, 2003, p. 114).

For its time, the focus of Taparelli’s theory of social justice was quite unique in that society, on his view, became just from the unified efforts of the subjects working upwards to society at large, rather than the traditional top-down authoritative notions of justice exhibited in Platonic, Aristotelian, and, to a lesser degree, Thomist thought. His views may even sound familiar to current calls for “grassroots” movements in response to a political system heavily influenced by large corporate interests. But due to the conservative political climate in which Taparelli was writing, his reputation persisted “as a sophist and reactionary zealot” (Behr, 2003, p. 99). This is not to say, however, that had history lent a more sympathetic ear to Taparelli’s idea of social justice there would be little
argument over its meaning today. Nor is it to say that concepts of social justice should reappropriate Taparelli’s distinctly Roman Catholic understanding of the common good. Instead, Taparelli affords us the origins of social justice as a specific concept, and brings forth an argument distinct from and engaged with the diverse but continuous history of justice, and its corollary, social justice, have undergone.

While this section describes the origins of social justice as a term, Taparelli appears to have had little influence on the discussion of social justice in education, particularly in the United States. His works and the majority of the commentary on them remain in either Latin or Italian, with very few English translations. However, justice maintained its biblical grounding, albeit through Protestant rather than Catholic lineages, when it crossed from Europe over to the Americas. As European colonization began to take root in what would become New England, settlers, concerned with their children’s education, put in motion laws that would eventually take shape as the current educational system in the United States.

**Social Justice and American Education**

As education of European settlers in the United States was initially grounded in the religiosity of Puritanism, its goal was to teach young people functional literacy so they could read The Bible, as well as develop a strong work ethic (Spring, 2001). The first law pertaining to education in the United States was *The Old Deluder Satan Law*, passed in Massachusetts in 1647. *Old Deluder Satan* mandated that all towns with more than 100 families establish a grammar school to teach young people to read and write while also instilling Christian values (Urban & Wagoner, 2003). These early grammar schools represent the earliest forms of structured education in the United States and the purpose of these schools was the maintenance of Christian traditions and the perpetuation of a strict social order (Spring, 2001).

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, education in the United States became more formal, although it was provided primarily for male children of elite, White families who could afford to send their sons to private academies (Urban & Wagoner, 2003). These private institutions slowly shed the religiosity of the early grammar schools by providing more secular instruction in the canon of Western literature and culture. However, these were private institutions exclusive to the male children of White, upper-class citizens, and therefore, social justice in terms of equal opportunity was not part of the agenda (Spring, 2001). In fact, even in the mid-1800s the idea of a “public” education system for all young people meant specifically all White young people, an idea which emerged as political leaders sought to maintain the country’s burgeoning democracy (Lubienski, 2001; Osgood, 1997). It was this initial concept of public education, in the name of protecting and promoting the “common” good that led to the creation of common schools.

Horace Mann, the United States’ first state Secretary of Education in Massachusetts, pioneered the idea of public schools for all young people with the development of his common schools. Mann’s idea for common schools came to fruition as the country was experiencing rapid population growth, urbanization, and industrialization (Lubienski, 2001). Mann envisioned a system of state-administered public schools that would offer all American youth an equitable education rooted in the common experiences and values of 19th century life (Urban & Wagoner, 2003). As Robert Osgood (1997) argues, Mann’s common school movement was both reformist and optimistic because Mann intended to alleviate friction between disparate social groups by uniting students through a common education.
Mann’s vision for American schools represented the first attempt to educate mass numbers of a diverse population of students, but it remains debatable whether Mann’s vision was realized. As Joel Spring argues,

Common schooling was to create a common social class by the extension of a common class consciousness among all members of society. Mixing the rich and the poor within the same schoolhouse would cause social-class conflict to give way to a feeling of membership in a common social class and would thus provide society with a common set of political and moral values. (Spring, 2001, p. 113)

In this sense, the common schools were to unite all students by providing them with a common education which would eventually eliminate social inequity among disparate ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes.

While Mann’s ideas for common schools invoke notions of distributive social justice, unsurprisingly, many of the subsequent practices ran counter to his ideals. First, while the common schools were supposed to educate all young people, the education provided by the common schools was grounded on the specific values and traditions of European Protestants. Second, there is no evidence that common schools ever remedied any of the social issues Mann held as problematic, including the unequal distribution of wealth and resources (Spring, 2001). Further, instead of alleviating inequities, common schools created formal structures such as standardized curricula and tracking, which have maintained inequality in schools throughout the last 150 years (Rogers & Oakes, 2005).

Common schools continued to proliferate throughout the early 20th century, but it was during this time that a growing number of progressive educators became more vocal in their critique of education’s role in maintaining social injustices. John Dewey is perhaps the most prolific 20th century progressive philosopher and educator, and much of Dewey’s philosophy informed notions of social justice in education. Throughout much of his early writings, Dewey argued that schools did not exist apart from society and that the chief responsibility of schools was to involve students in ongoing inquiry into real social issues (Dewey, 1900/1990, 1916/1944). In Moral Principles in Education, Dewey states that, “Apart from participation in social life, the school has no moral end nor aim” (Dewey, 1909/1975, p. 11). Dewey held that schools should be living, active communities where the deliberation over issues relating to social equality would replace the learning of isolated curricular information. In a Deweyan sense, schools were important in the degree to which they assisted students in becoming critical social beings who worked to create a more egalitarian society (Kliebard, 1994).

To Dewey, the creation of an equitable society had its genesis in democratic schools where individuals would freely engage with one another in ongoing inquiry that would inform current social practices. Dewey pushed for the creation of “joint spaces” where individuals would work together to reconstruct knowledge claims in the quest to fight inequality (Rogers & Oakes, 2006). In Democracy and Education, Dewey (1916/1944) argues

Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living; of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (p. 89)
Again, for Dewey, social justice would be realized when individuals were free to participate in occupations of their choice, while also contributing to the welfare of their fellow citizens and society in general.

Throughout his writings on education, John Dewey advocated for an active public that would be educated in democratic schools, and would be free to engage in inquiry that was participatory and inclusive. To Dewey, a more just society could emerge only when the individuals most burdened by injustice were involved in actively working for social change. Again, we turn to *Democracy and Education*, where Dewey argues:

> The desired transformation is not difficult to define in a formal way. It signifies a society in which every person shall be occupied in something which makes the lives of others better worth living, and which accordingly makes the ties which bind persons together more perceptible—which breaks down the barriers of distance between them. (1916/1944, p. 316)

To Dewey, the creation of a just society requires the active participation of all society’s members in the democratic process. Further, while society was rife with injustices, Dewey held that schools were responsible not for reproducing the status quo, but for developing young people into active social beings who would work to ameliorate social injustices.

While the Reconstructionist movement in education was informed by much of Dewey’s philosophy, both George Counts and Harold Rugg argued that the quest for a distributive social justice must be at the heart of the American curriculum (Kliebard, 1994). While Counts questioned the role of schools in perpetuating social inequity, Rugg focused his attention on the subject area of social studies. Despite their pedagogical differences, Counts and Rugg argued that economic and social disparities between rich and poor were harming the nation’s democracy and suppressing opportunity (Stern & Riley, 2002). Through a focus on schools as social centers where issues of economic and social disparity could be questioned and critiqued, Counts and Rugg hoped to forge a new social order that was equitable and just.

Harold Rugg’s efforts to instill elements of distributive social justice in American education were realized in his challenges to the American curriculum. Rugg extended Dewey’s belief in an integrated curriculum in his critique of social studies as a curricular subject. Rugg argued that all curricula were social studies and all subject matter directly related to societal problems (Stern & Riley, 2002). In this sense, Rugg viewed the subject of social studies as the practice of critically examining social injustices, not a process of memorizing historical facts. Rugg held that teachers should act as facilitators working with students to critically evaluate current social problems. In a Ruggian curriculum, teachers and students would study “real world problems in the hope of preserving and building a more equitable democratic society in the United States” (Stern & Riley, 2002). Rugg believed that his approach to social studies would eradicate the passivity he saw in schools and inspire teachers and students to adopt an “active concern for social justice” (Kliebard, 1994).

Like his fellow Reconstructionists, George Counts was critical of the American education system’s passivity regarding social injustice. Counts, who was an outspoken socialist in the 1920s, challenged teachers and schools to work together to create a society that was egalitarian (Kohl, 1980). Counts’s ultimate goal was to replace the individualism embedded in America’s schools with a new focus on issues of social justice (Kliebard, 1994). Counts argued that society would not become a socially just entity until students were taught to counter the conservative school order with a more radical education that promoted social change (Westbrook, 1991).
While the Reconstructionists were advancing schools as the key to ameliorating social injustice, African-American scholars, teachers, and students were fighting to gain access to education. It was during the years immediately following the end of the Civil War that schools established by ex-slaves began to emerge throughout the eastern United States (Spring, 2001). Throughout the last 25 years of the 19th century, African Americans fought to achieve equal access to education in hopes that literacy would lead to increased political power and economic prosperity. While African-American educational leaders made great strides in increasing educational opportunities for young people in the late 1800s, the fact remains that by 1900, most African-American children were educated in segregated schools that received little support from the White education establishment and were not adequately funded (Spring, 2001).

Two of the most important scholars leading the fight for equal access to education for African-American children during the late 19th century were W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. Washington was born a slave and was later educated at Hampton Institute, while Du Bois was born in Boston, MA and attended private schools (Newman, 2005; Urban & Wagoner, 2003). While each scholar fought for equal access to education for African Americans, the two educational leaders had disparate ideas for how best to educate young people so that they would become active in the struggle for social and economic equality.

Booker T. Washington advocated equal access to education for African Americans based in his belief that education should provide people with the skills needed to participate in an industrial society. To Washington, equality and justice would be realized when African Americans participated in the economy by holding jobs and earning a salary. To this end, Washington's sense of justice can be understood as distributive in that access to material possessions is equated with justice. Washington believed that the student shall be so educated that he shall be enabled to meet conditions as they exist now in the part of the South where he lives...that every student who graduates from the school shall have enough skill, coupled with intelligence and moral character, to enable him to make a living for himself and others; to make each one love labour instead of trying to escape it. (Washington, 1901/1995, p. 120)

Washington held that a strong work ethic, along with moral character would lead African Americans to equal standing in society.

W.E.B Du Bois promoted a different notion of education where schools would teach African-American children the skills needed to acquire social and political power while deepening their understanding of the struggle for equality (Spring, 2001). Unlike Washington, Du Bois shunned a distributive notion of justice in arguing that a just and democratic society required the recognition of each person's abilities and experiences (Seigfried, 1999). It was Du Bois's contention that all members of society had something to contribute and should have equal opportunity to use their strengths for the betterment of society. Du Bois argued that democracy is eroded when it “excludes women or Negroes or the poor or any class because of innate characteristics which do not interfere with intelligence...” (Du Bois, 1903/1994, p. 45). To this end, Du Bois supported full inclusion of all members of society in ongoing dialogues that would continue to reform and reshape a sense of social justice.

There is perhaps no greater example of distributive social justice in education than what was realized as a result of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas in 1954. The landmark case, brought before the Supreme Court by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), ended legally sanctioned segregation in...
public schools. The NAACP argued that “separate but equal has no place” in public education, and that separate schools, divided by race, are inherently unequal (Spring, 2001). While Brown overturned segregation in American schools, the case can be understood as an example of distributive justice. As the process of public education occurs within a larger social context, it cannot be seen merely as something to which people are granted equal access. If a true sense of social justice was realized, each individual would have the ability to influence the structural systems of power that grant or withhold access to things such as education.

Since the late 1970s, public education has continued to promote an understanding of social justice grounded in the ideals of distributive social justice. To this end, scholars and politicians have been able to claim that justice in education is something that is doled out to those who are in need of, or deemed worthy of, receiving it. As we have argued, the concept of justice is open to myriad interpretations, and privileging a distributive notion of justice allows dissimilar groups to claim that they are committed to promoting social justice in education.

Social Justice at Present

Discerning the meaning of social justice is challenging because of its disparate uses across diverse viewpoints. As described at the beginning of this chapter, due to such widely varied meanings, it is possible for different groups to act in opposition to another, yet each can do so under the aegis of social justice. In education, for instance, researchers such as Diane Ravitch (1994, 2005), Mortimer Adler (Adler & Paideia Group, 1982), Chester Finn, Jr. (1993), Hertling (1985), E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 1988), and Ruenzel (1996) argue for a just society through assimilation, maintaining educational philosophies that serve to perpetuate the status quo of severely unbalanced power structures in the United States. At the same time, critical theorists, progressivists, and liberals are currently fighting for social justice in education with the specific goal of exposing and eradicating the same power structures their opposition seeks to preserve. How is it that groups with such different goals can both argue for social justice?

To begin to answer this question, the different senses of social justice that each of these groups utilizes must be explored. Iris Marion Young (1990), in her book, Justice and the Politics of Difference, explores the idea of social justice and brings to bear what she calls the “distributive paradigm,” which she claims is designated by “a tendency to conceive social justice and distribution as coextensive concepts” (p. 16). Said differently, a person operating from the standpoint of the distributive paradigm argues for equality of distribution, and when this equality is met, their claims for justice are completely satisfied. Moreover, the distributive paradigm “assumes a single model for all analyses of justice: all situations in which justice is at issue are analogous to the situation of persons dividing a stock of goods and comparing the size of the portions individuals have” (p. 18). Given the earlier discussion of Aristotle, Young’s definition of the distributive paradigm sounds very familiar. While much has happened to refine the idea of distributive justice since its inception, the primary tenet stated at its founding and rendered into the Aristotelian formula noted above, has held throughout all its revisions. For example, equal opportunity of education as understood by Mortimer Adler (Adler & Paideia Group, 1982), Finn (1993), Hirsch et al. (1988), and other “cultural literacy” proponents operates from the distributive paradigm by setting the goal of assuring students’ equal access to the same materials (i.e., the cultural literacy curriculum). To step outside of this paradigm is to question the agenda of this curriculum of which each student has his or her just share.
Thus, by equating social justice with distributive justice, as many contemporary scholars are prone to do, problems arise. A conflation between two forms of justice, social and distributive, emphasizes the allocation of property, understood broadly, at the expense of less quantifiable qualities that society entails, such as virtues, actions, and ideas, each of which comprise in part the very “good” social justice seeks to attain. This is not to say distributive notions of justice should be removed or replaced. To be sure, a theory of social justice without a distributive corollary is undesirable because of the importance a fair allotment of resources has to education. What is important to note, though, is that one does not equal the other, nor does one cover the area of the other. As Young (1990) states when speaking of educational opportunity specifically,

In the cultural context of the United States, male children and female children, working-class children and middle-class children, Black children and white children often do not have equally enabling educational opportunities even when an equivalent amount of resources has been devoted to their education. (p.26)

Distributive notions of justice find their strength in egalitarian ideals where each person has an equal share. While such dispensations are necessary to justice, absent from this egalitarian concept is the emancipatory emphasis found in social justice, an emphasis that seeks to free people from oppression. While distributive justice and social justice have areas that overlap in important ways, the latter becomes meager when equivocated with the former. The degree to which this is problematic in educational terms can be seen when those who argue for a distributive version of social justice reify knowledge as something which teachers deposit in their otherwise empty students, a process criticized by Paulo Freire as the “banking method” (2005). This reification of knowledge allows for people such as E. D. Hirsch, Jr., author of Cultural Literacy (Hirsch et al., 1988) and founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation, to claim they have a “social justice agenda” (Ruenzel, 1996) when constructing curricula in which a successful student is one who has memorized the preset list of facts for their grade level.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum from Hirsch, Kenneth Howe (1997), a staunch critic of Hirsch, presents a timely and extensive work on the role of social justice in equality of educational opportunity. In speaking against Hirsch’s Core Knowledge program he argues, “Hirsch’s proposal is worse than ineffectual. It constitutes an obstacle to equality of educational opportunity for those groups historically excluded from participation” (p.3). Recall the point above regarding the difficulties and contradictions that currently reside in debates on education with opposed views, both of which appeal to social justice as their goal. Howe obviously has a different agenda from Hirsch, yet both claim to work in the name of social justice. How does a teacher interested in the topic of social justice in education distinguish what Howe is calling social justice from Hirsch’s use of the term?

Howe seems to slide between social justice as distributive justice, and social justice as something different from distributive justice. This is possibly due to his oftentimes traditionally grounded view of justice, which seems to understand distributive and social justice as interchangeable. For instance, in attempt to address oppression, something that, Young (1990) contends, falls outside of the “distributive paradigm,” Howe (1997) calls for a principle of nonoppression, stating that, “nonoppression is rooted in the requirements of democracy. It must both be applied to and observed by all who make up a political community, which is to say it must be reciprocal” (pp. 69–70). While he bases this principle, at least in part, on Young’s work (1990), the reciprocity (i.e., the give and take between groups) required by his principle slips too readily into a distributive model of
justice that understands equal allocation of nonoppression between parties, for example “gay and lesbian youth versus Christian fundamentalists” (p. 70) as an attainment of social justice. Howe’s work, in this sense, is indicative of much of the current work done by progressive scholars in the name of social justice. Given Young’s (1990) criticism of the “distributive paradigm,” the present chapter sees Howe’s book as an example of the difficulties involved when writing about social and distributive justice in a way that fails to clearly distinguish the domain of each. It would be a misreading of Howe to understand him as arguing for the same social justice as Hirsch.

As a result, the following discussion of Howe follows two threads. First, his book serves as an extremely poignant criticism of ways which people interpret social justice to maintain status quo educational opportunity frameworks. For instance, he rightly criticizes as cultural imperialism “conservative” thinkers who emphasize the need for a uniform curriculum in order to maintain a uniform culture. Second, his use of social justice interchangeably with, and at times indistinguishable from, distributive justice reveals many of the difficulties the present chapter seeks to highlight as one of the primary historical problems which social justice in education currently faces. These threads, while organized individually, do not appear in Howe’s text separately. In other words, the first thread, the criticism he offers of conservative educational opportunity is simultaneously subject to the second thread, the equivocation of social and distributive justice. While in agreement with the criticisms Howe (1997) makes of conservative educational ideologues such as Hirsch, Adler, Ravitch, and John Chubb, this chapter proceeds with a reading of Howe that points up the difficulties educators are subject to when failing to distinguish between social and distributive justice.

Howe (1997) recasts the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* stating, “even if, contrary to fact, resources were distributed equally among racially segregated schools, legally sanctioned segregation so stigmatizes and demoralizes segregated groups as to permanently disadvantage them” (p. 78). To extend his reasoning, this exhibits precisely the fault found in equating social and distributive justice. Imagine if, after the Brown ruling, schools were desegregated in such a way that all resources were made equal among desegregated schools. The conditions for just distribution would be met in accordance with Howe’s request, but the oppression that comes in the forms of racism, classism, and sexism (among others) goes as much unaddressed in a segregated school as a desegregated one. Even when resources are distributed equally, including opportunity understood distributively, oppression continues to flourish. The concern of social justice, as it is conceived here, is ending that oppression. Again, this is not to say social justice operates outside of the distributive justice, or vice versa, but instead that social justice must act in tandem with distributive justice in education for a more just society. Additionally, an ongoing dialogue in which interlocutors, such as teachers, students, administrators, and parents actively address social justice as apart from and corollary to distributive justice can serve as an emancipatory practice by identifying and eradicating the institutional and individual constructs which work to oppress members of the school community.

Another difficulty we find in Howe (1997) is through the topics of recognition and self-respect. He concedes that even “[w]hen (full blown) equality of educational opportunity cannot be achieved...social justice still makes demands, including educational ones. In this vein, the participatory interpretation (of equal opportunity of education) has as one of its requirements that all persons be afforded recognition and secured self-respect” (p. 89). The “demands” social justice makes here are arguably outside the purview of a distributive form of justice. Neither recognition nor self-respect is a resource that can be distributed by a controlling body such as a school. Certainly, there are better and worse ways for a school to foster an environment for such qualities through equality of
distribution, and this does much to emphasize the importance of distributive and social justice operating in tandem. But, we argue, recognition and self-respect are social interactions that are just or unjust in ways that distribution can only understand by its results. Without discounting this focus on results, it is only partial and does nothing to address the oppression inherent in many forms of recognition (e.g., recognizing a different race as inferior; and self-respect, understanding one’s self in respect to racist worldviews). To reiterate, this is the point at which social justice can make the claim that particular forms of recognition are unjust, not by appealing to distributive results, but instead by exposing the oppression, in the examples above, inherent to racism.

These two examples express the injustice that can continue even when the demands of distributive justice are met in schools. In the first, racism can remain intact even if we agree to go along with Howe’s thought experiment concerning Brown v. Board of Education because de jure desegregation does nothing to address the racism held by different groups equally distributed in the same school. In a related way, the second example shows how groups and individuals can internalize and externalize oppression in ways that can proceed unnoticed even when achieving equality of recognition and self-respect.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have provided a history of the concept and argued for a rethinking of the idea of social justice in education. It is our contention that over the last century educational theorists and scholars have conflated the idea of social justice with notions of distributive justice. By conceptualizing social justice as an ideal that exists within a distributive paradigm, scholars and education leaders, with ideologies that remain contrary to social justice, can claim to promote social justice by providing students equal access to education and participation in our meritocracy. Competing with these notions of distributive justice in education are those teachers, scholars, and leaders engaged in social justice education that attempts to bring about social change by addressing social injustice in schools and the greater community.

Currently, American education practices are grounded in notions of standardization and the preparation of young people for participation in a global economy. Realizing a nondistributive notion of justice in education is, arguably, an unattainable goal within an education system that promotes justice as existing when students are given equal access to education within an already stratified system. Further, preparing students for participation in a global economic system does not require that schools address issues of injustice; globalization requires only that schools offer students similar experiences within a meritocratic system. Current and future educators and leaders interested in education for social justice must consider how they can overcome notions of distributive justice so as to forge a democratic education for real social change.

Notes

1. The following section takes its starting point from Ancient Greek philosophy. While we understand Plato as a valuable contributor to discussions of justice, we do not take his philosophy as an ahistorical or acultural point of reference. His work in the Republic is useful as it pertains to justice and education, but we eschew a canonical or Eurocentric justification for his inclusion.
2. In this formula the terms A and B represent the persons, and the terms c and d represent their share.

**References**


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