



The conceptualization and exploration of socially just teaching: A qualitative study on higher education English professors

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We probed the conceptualization of socially just teaching in higher education.
- The participants were non-native English professors from Iran.
- Findings indicated the importance of the critique of dominant ideologies.
- The importance of a learner-centered curriculum was also highlighted.
- It was shown that socially just teaching requires the ontological turns.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the conceptualization of socially just teaching in higher education. Participants were English language professors who were studied through a qualitative study. The data collected through interviews and memos were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Three themes were extracted: a critical stance, a dialogic and emergent curriculum, and ontological turns. The findings indicated that socially just teaching requires foregrounding the questions of being. Furthermore, the findings revealed that socially just teaching necessitates critiquing othering based on essentialist stereotypes through the contextualized teaching which revolves around cultural recognition, political representation, and contextual sensitivity.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays one of the rising concerns in human life, and in academia and education in particular, is social justice and how people can reach a fair approach in their life without breaching ethical etiquettes. In spite of the existence of a plethora of definitions—both theoretically (e.g., North, 2006) and practically (e.g., Bigelow, Harvey, Karp, & Miller, 2001)—for socially just teaching, there is still controversy regarding what justice and being just would mean in different educational milieu. Exploring individual and structural orientations of social justice-informed teaching, Chubbuck (2010) defined socially just teaching as a pedagogy for fostering all learners' learning opportunities through

transformation of structures and policies that would exert inequality and discrimination. Reviewing the main themes of justice and equity in papers published during the last few years in the *Journal of Teaching and Teacher Education* (TATE), Kaur (2012) considered the creation of equal chance and justice for all learners as the biggest challenge for teachers. In their inquiry into higher education, Shay and Peseta (2016) also alluded to a global movement calling for a more socially just educational system, which “is profoundly dissonant to the dominant neoliberal discourses currently shaping higher education” (p. 361).

Consequently, the present study probed the conceptualization of socially just teaching by higher education professors. Despite its significance, socially just teaching is a term with ill-defined meaning (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2016). Moreover, the conceptualization of socially just teaching was addressed in this study because it will “best support and encourage burgeoning social justice educators” (Johnson, Oppenheim, & Suh, 2009, p. 294).

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According to Reagan, Chen, and Vernikoff (2016), the exploration of teachers' and professors' beliefs concerning social justice can be considered critical components of their pedagogical practices and relationships. Thus, the findings of this study can also shed some light on the realities of the classroom and provide guidelines for teacher education programs that address the preparation of socially just professors in higher education. Developing fundamental principles for teacher education programs and practices, Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (2006) also referred to the importance of the relationships between schools and higher education. They argued that the dominant views of learning to teach in teacher education programs consider higher education institutions and universities as sites where theoretical frameworks of such teacher preparation programs are presented, whereas school teaching experience is regarded as the possibility for practicing learning principles of teaching. They explained that such a perception of teacher education programs "creates many difficulties, including the fact that the "expertise" of teaching practice is often assumed to reside largely in schools with teachers. This view diminishes the rich possibilities that can be made available at the university site" (p. 1029). Studying higher education professors, who were teaching at universities, the current study addressed such a rich possibility through an exploration of professors' own conceptualizations and practices.

Given that the participants of the present research were English language professors, more pedagogical implications and significance become visible. In other words, socially just teaching can be highly important in the context of English language teaching, because the global spread of English is the result of neoliberal ideologies and globalization whereby speakers of other languages are regarded as others (Pennycook, 2016).

Indeed, this study was an attempt to hear the voice of Iranian English language professors in higher education with regard to social justice in teaching English in higher education. As Osei-Kofi, Shahjahan, and Patton (2010) argued, "a significant amount of literature in the Higher Education field is positivist, grounded in Western, male-dominated epistemologies, objectifies the "other", and silences the voices of oppressed groups" (p. 327). Furthermore, Kaur (2012) indicated that most of the studies on justice in teaching were conducted in North America and Europe. She also referred to the scanty number of such studies in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Thus, we sought to study participants from a country in the Middle East as a new context.

2. Relevant literature and theoretical framework

Centering socially just teaching in higher education, Osei-Kofi et al. (2010) explained that socially just teaching has just recently attracted the attention of higher education researchers and scholars. They also referred to the extensive studies conducted on socially just teaching in K-12 settings and explained that "this type of programmatic emphasis has not had a significant presence in the field of Higher education" (p. 327). But in recent years, several studies have addressed socially just teaching in higher education.

Developing a framework for socially just pedagogies, Osman and Hornsby (2017) asserted that teachers and students are unique individuals, who are positioned along hierarchies of power with regard to their differences in gender, race, sexuality, and so forth. Indeed, they maintained that socially just pedagogies in higher education should provide an opportunity for teachers and students to question and challenge such taken-for-granted hierarchies. Referring to the use of different methods and activities—such as focus group discussions, dialogue, and narrative in socially just approaches—they acknowledged that such approaches "weave the private and public lives of teachers and students into integrated and

whole realities and call into question dichotomies that are ever present in our classrooms" (p. 8). Also, Osman and Hornsby argued that socially just pedagogies aim at hearing and enhancing students' voices through specific pedagogical practices that focus on their experiences with the world. In addition, in 2016, the journal of *Teaching in Higher Education* called for papers on curriculum as contestation and devoted an issue to a socially just curriculum. The authors of the issue (Abbas, Ashwin, & Mclean, 2016; Anwaruddin, 2016; Clegg, 2016; Coleman, 2016; Horden, 2016; Lockett, 2016; Millar, 2016; Winberg, Winberg, Jacobs, Garraway, & Engel-Hills, 2016) focused on knowledge as the site of contestation for providing the opportunity for distributive justice.

Although the above-mentioned studies addressed justice and equity in higher education, none of them could provide a substantive discussion on the meaning of this concept. Reviewing the theoretical and empirical literature on social justice and equity in higher education, Brennan and Naidoo (2008) also argued that such studies are mainly derived by policy attention and are not founded on a clear definition of the concept. Similarly, Chubbuck (2007) indicated that there is a strong need for theoretical and practical transparency considering contents and methods of socially just teaching and asserted that researchers are required to convey the voice of teachers to provide such a transparency. Although she studied preservice teachers, this point can be worthy of attention in higher education context. Therefore, we sought to address the conceptualization of socially just teaching by higher education English language professors in the present study.

In addition to the above-mentioned studies that probed the social justice in teaching in higher education, it is not pointless to refer to studies conducted by Chubbuck (2007, 2010), Whipp (2013), and Fraser (2009) because of their close relation to the present study. Focusing on teachers' candidates, Chubbuck (2007) studied 15 preservice teachers' definition and vision on socially just teaching. Participants of her study included 13 teacher candidates as white, one as Latina, and one as Asian American. All these teacher candidates participated in a teacher education program in an urban university. They were asked to write reflective journals and elaborate on their definition of teaching for social justice. They were also asked to write about the course content of teaching for social justice and illuminate its intellectual, affective, behavioral, and spiritual effects. As Chubbuck indicated, the analysis of her participants' reflective journals highlighted the importance of appropriate curricular content, effective pedagogical practices, and rationale for socially just teaching that revolved around ethics and faith. She also referred to the appropriate curricular content as covering both basic and high-level knowledge and skills and addressing subjects on justice to inform and empower learners. Based on the findings of her study, Chubbuck suggested that empowering students to read and write can create the possibility for a better personal life. Considering social justice topics, she indicated that such topics make students think about the realities of their lives, inform them of the existing inequities, and encourage them to improve their relationships with other people. Also, Chubbuck argued that effective pedagogical practices can include problem-posing activities and classroom discussion and debates to engage all of the learners into the classroom activities and realities. She asserted that extensive dialogues with students can make them engage in deep and personal explorations of various issues.

Furthermore, Chubbuck (2010) proposed a framework for socially just teaching in teacher education programs based on the theories and her experience as a teacher educator. She explained that socially just teaching means understanding students, acknowledging the societal structures of the places where they live, and providing them with high-status knowledge and skills. She argued that socially just teaching is culturally relevant and takes

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