***Advancing social justice in differentiated higher educ ation system***

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**Abstract**

Divergent perspectives exist about the role of higher education in advancing social justice following global shifts from elitist systems, towards ‘massification’ and expansion of access. In view of the institutionalised social injustices and exclusionary policies prior to 1994 in South Africa, discourses on social justice in higher education are understandably marked by emotional overtones including expanding access, widening participation and equity of access notably for groups previously deprived of participation in the sector. While higher education has a role in redressing political, social and economic injustices in societies however, contending constructions of social justice and their implications for access to knowledge acquired, and distributed by higher education are relatively un-nuanced. This paper contributes to debates about locating social justice in higher education research underscoring constructions of access to knowledge to advance social justice agenda in the differentiated higher education system of South Africa. It analyses prevailing social justice formations predicated on unequal power relations, social constructivist, outcomes-based and formal access and how these constructions advance enduring social justice by inter alai; changing admissions policies, deracialising the sector and increasing funding targeting particularly previously disadvantaged students. The paper also canvases the less explored notions of epistemic access and nature of knowledge to advance social justice in South Africa where higher education institutions still reflect geopolitical patterns of the previous system. The paper is grounded in the social relations of knowledge, the nature of knowledge, and knowledge differentiation narratives pioneered by Bernstein, and modified, and extended by his theorists. I argue that while unequal power relations, social constructivist and formal access formations have been justifiably canvassed since the 1994 democratic elections, research is skeletal on how exposure to epistemological/epistemic access and reasoning, and the nature of knowledge constructions could contribute to achieving greater and lifelong social justice. Thus, unequal power relations and formal access narratives need to be tempered by epistemic reasoning and the nature of knowledge constructions to further lasting emancipatory knowledge and greater social justice. It is further argued that the advancement of social justice imperatives in South Africa is eclipsed by outcomes-based and competency-oriented approaches, and graduate attribute vocabulary that replace epistemic access to knowledge that transcends immediate contexts.

**Keywords**

Social justice, higher education research, social constructivism, epistemological/epistemic access, nature and structure of knowledge, powerful knowledge & knowledge of powerful

**Introduction**

The literature on social justice in general, and in higher education in particular, covers an array of related and sometimes overlapping terms, including expanding access, justice and fairness, equality, equity of access, participation, and equal opportunities for all.

While issues of social justice have always been part of a higher education transformation process globally, the impacts of contending constructions of social justice and their implications for practice in the different contexts remain relatively un-nuanced. The thrust of the paper is, firstly, on analysis on social justice constructions in different contexts and historical epochs, and how these may advance expansion of access, equity of access and equity of outcomes, and widen participation in higher education globally and in South Africa. Second, discussion is held on consideration of social justice narratives predicated on the neo-Marxist and social constructivism in the transformation of higher education 21 years after the first democratic elections of 1994. Third is a conversation on the unexplored nuances between formal access to satisfy universal conventions and global demands for ‘massification’, opening and widening access (formal access), and epistemological and epistemic access and implications of these constructions to promote social justice in a racially, culturally and socially diverse South Africa society. My interest in particular is to contribute to debates on how denying students access not only to knowledge but also to a special kind of epistemological/epistemic knowledge could be a major source of current discontents about how the higher education sector deals with social justice in post-apartheid society.

The paper further contributes to discussions on higher education predicated on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and associated outcomes, competence and graduate attributes logic to advance social justice. It is grounded on some established and recognised, and less established and recognised theories and narratives underlying social justice constructions. These narratives include social justice construction predicated on knowledge, its nature, structures, and its differentiation form pioneered by Bernstein (2000) and modified, and extended by his theorists (McArthur, 2013; *epistemological* access (Morrow, 2007), and epistemic relations (Becks, 2013; Maton & Moore, 2010; Muller, 2009; Wheelahan, 2007; Young, 2008; 2012;Young & Muller, 2010).

**Constructions of social justice in higher education research**

**Social constructivist and power relations of social justice construction**

This perspective is built on a power relations approach in societies and therefore locates research of social justice within the broader socio-cultural, political, cultural, economic and historical context of countries. Some notable theorists drawing on neo-Marxist of unequal power relations and social constructivism interpretations in the 1970s include Loui Althusser (1970; Bourdier & Passeron, 1977; Bowels & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1975; Giroux, 1981; 1983).

Henry Giroux on the other hand proposed a slightly different approach in that rather than describing how unequal power relations are reproduced and sustained through ideology, higher education should question these relations (1981). Thus, while sharing a concern about unequal power relations, Giroux argues that education institutions should not reflect what is happening in society but rather address inequities in academia (2007).

The power relations of Neo-Marxist narrative of social justice is also often expressed in the post-colonial and post-imperialist discourses that question exploitation of indigenous communities mainly though ideology and hegemony by former colonial countries. The campaigners of post-colonial and post-imperialist narratives therefore critisise the subjugation of indigenous communities, sometimes in the form of what is termed ‘symbolic violence’ (Fanon, 1961). Grosfoguel calls for decolonialilty and decolonial epistemic perspective and decolonisation of knowledge to critique the Western canon (2001, p.4)

**Social justice construction grounded on knowledge in higher education**

The envisioned social justice construction discussed below focuses on knowledge, its nature, structure and differentiation, as a neglected area of research in higher education (Becks, 2013; Bernstein, 2000; McArthur, 2013; Maton & Moore, 2001; Morrow, 2007; Muller, 2009; Wheelahan, 2007; Young, 2008).

Drawing on Adorno’s thesis, McArthur explores the nature of knowledge of higher education as an important aspect of research on social justice (2013). McArthur’s claim is premised on the assertion that knowledge of higher education is ‘dynamic, contested, complex and emancipatory and therefore should not be reduced to issues of unequal power relations of critical pedagogy’ (McArthur, 2013, p.13).

Similarly, Young, indebted to Bernstein’s original theory and also borrowing from Wheelahan (2007), reworked them to invent notions of knowledge differentiation and distinguished between two ideas of knowledge of the powerful, and powerful knowledge (2008, 2010, 2012). Knowledge of the powerful that seemingly forms the basis of the neo-Maxist and social constructivist perspectives is essentially grounded on the ‘neo-Maxist dictum that the ruling ideas at the time are those of the ruling class’ Young, 2012, pp. 14-15). Young (2012) is sceptical about this type of knowledge based on the assertion that all knowledge of higher education refers to the backgrounds of those who have most access to knowledge or who give it legitimacy (see Beck, 2013, p.179). In contrast, Young argues that the idea of knowledge of the powerful should be differentiated from powerful knowledge, referring to what knowledge can do, or what intellectual power it gives to those who have access to it (Beck, 2013, p.179).

**Social justice in higher education research in South Africa**

Given the unique historical and political structure in South Africa prior to the 1994 democratic elections, issues of access, redress inequities and addressing the various forms of social injustice continue to dominate research on policy and practice in higher education (Bunting, 1994; Reddy, 2004; Scott et al., 2007). The general belief has therefore been that ‘higher education, and public higher education especially has potential to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and social justice, and the growth and development of the economy’ (CHE, 2000, pp. 25-26).

However, there has recently been a growing perception that while past policies have been repealed and removed from the statutes, social injustices in higher education persists 22 years after the democratic elections of 1994. Key issues are whether social justice in higher education been enhanced through an increase in access; what new forms of social exclusion and injustice in higher education being created in the name of access; and whether capabilities approach provide a useful theoretical and conceptual basis for understanding this access dilemma and working towards access for social justice? (Wilson-Strydom, 2011).

These questions bring into focus Morrow’s invention of distinction between *formal* (institutional) access and *epistemological* access (Morrow 2007),and *epistemic* access (Muller 2009) (goods distributed by the institution) as alternative frames of social justice construction in higher education research in South Africa. Formal access, according to this framework, refers to access to institutions of learning and includes issues such as admission policies, deracialisation and desegregation policies, democratisation of governance and management structures, and increased funding that targets particularly previously disadvantaged students to advance social justice. Conversely, *epistemological* access is access to knowledge acquired and distributed by educational institution, and reflecting debates about knowledge and what is taught Morrow 2007, p.2). *Epistemic* access (Muller’s 2009), built on Morrow’s (2007) epistemology, refers to access to knowledge of specific disciplines which is cumulative and builds on previous knowledge that is coherent and lays foundations for further knowledge building, applicable to a range of contexts.

Building on Morrow’s formulation, Badat (2010) questioned the prevailing conceptions of epistemology and ontology and the extent to which the latter are being deracialised, degendered and decolonised to address social injustices. He argued that conceptions of epistemology and ontology include ‘institutional and academic cultures, and largely ignored epistemological and ontological issues associated with learning and teaching, curriculum development and pedagogical practice’ (Badat 2010, p. 18).

The social justice narrative in South Africa is further caught within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) discourse, associated outcomes and competence-based education logic. Outcomes Based Education and Training (OBET) in South Africa can be traced back to the 1970s, emanating from discussions between trade unions and business at ‘breaking down barriers to education and training, and at linking the world of education and the world of work’ (Allais 2003, p.308). This education ‘represented a shift away from the purely input-based approach that had characterised most South African schooling under apartheid (Allais 2003, p.310).

**Discussion and conclusion**

In the light of colonial history in Africa, including South Africa, social constructivist and neo-Maxist narratives continue to shape discussions about redressing social injustice, including denial of access to educational institutions, exclusion on the bases of race, cultural, linguistic backgrounds, and increasingly class-based exclusions. This discourse claims that meaningful social justice can only be realised if tempered by appreciation of differences, including social, racial, cultural, economic backgrounds and class as part of addressing social justice in education. Accordingly, focus is on equitable and not equal division of resources to compensate communities that were historically excluded from participating in and accessing education.

It is however argued in this paper that while decoloniality, neo-Marxist, power relations and social constructivist narratives are generally appealing and therefore canvased in post-colonial and post-apartheid contexts, they remain trapped in unequal power relations narratives exercised through ideology and hegemony and do not seem to account for knowledge. It is therefore argued in this paper that power relations and social constructivist narratives that explain social injustices in higher education in terms of power, ideology and hegemony should be tempered by a more robust construction of social justice that firstly recognizes the centrality of knowledge, its nature and differentiated forms.I argue that while increasing formal access continues to be key to advance social justice especially for working-class students from diverse cultural, racial and linguistic backgrounds, research is necessary on the role of *epistemic* as the country enters its third decade of democratic rule. Thus, while conceptualisation of formal access has been an important consideration to satisfy demands of ‘massification’ and expansion of access and widened participation, it has become necessary explore ho *epistemic* reasoning complement formal access.

Furthermore, the author will argue that social justice imperatives (formal and *epistemic* access) to higher education in South Africa are often eclipsed by global and national demands of the National Qualification Framework vocabulary, corresponding outcomes and assessment-driven curriculum designs of professional and sectoral fields of practice. Conversely, the proposed centralisation of *epistemic* access to knowledge appeals to powerful knowledge that transcends immediate contexts and is transferable to diverse contexts. This meaningful social justice could be achieved by exposing graduates to conceptual powerful and emancipatory knowledge that increases *epistemic* access to higher learning, and enables the transferability of knowledge (Wheelahan 2007; Young 2008; McArthur 2013). Emancipatory potential knowledge in this paper is contrasted knowledge that is contextually bound and, therefore, confine students to particular contexts, and deny them access knowledge that enable them to function in the broader society nationally and internationally.

The data to be used in the paper will be drawn from the literature and policy documents on the curricula of professional and sectoral fields of practice, and from curriculum documents of these fields.

In particular, knowledge differentiation illuminates the importance of distinguishing between knowledge of the powerful predicated on neo-Marxist and social constructivist narratives of social justice.

Similarly, emphasis on achievement of competence and outcomes, OBET and CBT recognises neither formal nor epistemological/epistemic access as social justice construction in post-apartheid society. Thus, issues of social justice in OBE and CBT are lost through generic pedagogic modes that prioritise teaching of outcomes, competence and inculcation of graduate attributes that are said to be acquired beyond content and knowledge.

This paper draw the following conclusions. First, specific historical and structural conditions, because of social justice narratives prior to and after the democratic elections in South Africa, have been shaped by power relation that neo-Marxist and social constructivists see as a challenge to liberal colonial system, and the apartheid policies and ideology.

Second, I argue formal access need to be tempered by provision of adequate infrastructure, including student accommodation to adequate lecturer rooms that accommodate the flux of students following opening up and expanding access to students previously excluded from higher education, and addressing racial composition of staff to reflect the students’ racial composition.

Third, while progress has been made about research to advance social justice through formal access, research on the role of epistemological/epistemic access is necessary to expose students to emancipatory knowledge, epistemic reasoning, powerful knowledge that develop intellectual power and knowledge irreducible to ideology, power and hegemony to develop an alternative social justice construction in higher education in South Africa 23 years after the 1994 democratic elections.

Lastly, advancing sustained social justice in South African higher education is delayed by the pre-eminence of OBET and CBT of the NQF logic that have dictated research in higher education since the democratic elections of 1994. Consequently, OBET and CBT, like social constructivist construction, are exhausted theoretical tools for advancing meaningful social justice because they explicitly suppress knowledge and substitute it with outcomes, competence, processes and, recently, graduate attributes to advance social justice.

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