Perceived social justice through everyday life at school: just schools vs reality?[1]

Angeliki Grivopoulou (agrivopoulou@gmail.com)

Despina Karakatsani, Professor- University of the Peloponnese (despikar@yahoo.gr)

Evangelia Papaloi, Tutor-Hellenic Open University, (evipapaloi@gmail.com)

Abstract

As a social construct, school is subject to pressure from external and internal factors. Despite the rhetoric and attempts for achieving true social justice, educational units are strongly influenced by the forces of globalization, which seem to introduce a mix of homogenising tendencies and contest the established values and norms (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Interestingly, in today's difficult and rapidly changing socio-economic context, the basic pillars shaping a more democratic society (such as democracy and inclusion), social justice, citizenship and equal opportunities (Marshall & Theoharis, 2007) appear to be very important in remedying educational communities' malfunctioning and adapting school to social demands. Given that social justice allows equal distribution of resources to all members, putting the emphasis on self-determination and interdependence (Bell, 1997), we foster the idea that, in educational context, social justice could be a key-concept promoting school's mission and goals, opening the dialogue among all actors involved and enhancing students' active citizenship.

Keywords

Social Justice, Democracy, Active Citizenship

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Processes, Citizenship and Social Justice Perceived at School

In our global age, it appears that schools are dramatically affected by the socio-economic crisis, which is the result of the hegemony of the economy of knowledge. Osler (2015) states that there are some pressing issues related to the fragility of democracy that require the urgent attention of educators who are working to promote greater social justice in schools.

Democracy at school is transformed from politics into a fully economic concept defined by consumerism (Apple, 1998). Mere knowledge of democratic processes is not deemed sufficient to ensure that the student will grow up to become an active participant in the democratic processes. It is important that students perceive the meaning of democracy in terms of social justice and equity through active participation in decision making processes at school (Subba, 2014). Consequently, the role of educational leaders is to create an environment in schools in which the principles of democratic society can be experienced (West-Burnham, 2011). Gutiérrez (2013) underlines that a school that teaches and promotes citizenship is a school which takes into account the social context in which it operates, serves the personal needs of its members and works according to democratic values as a true community. Education for citizenship could be perceived as schools' response to the characteristics and demands of society. Interestingly, in Spain

> "students must learn to participate in the management of their school from knowledge of the school project, direct involvement in the drawing up of those documents where they can make suggestions and put forward ideas, the joint commitment to achieve the objectives and respect the agreements reached. So students should be aware that their school is run as a micro-society and that their active participation is crucial for its proper functioning. This will help to prepare future citizens committed to society" (Gutiérrez, 2013, p. 163).

Moreover, social justice is a vision that must become a way of life permeating all aspects of being human (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). Thus, social justice requires that every citizen protect, advance and promote the values, principles and ideals of social justice. Moreover, social justice in education involves promoting critical awareness of social inequalities and developing skills that work against these inequalities (Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013). According to Bell (2007), social justice is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is to foster "equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs... in which distribution of resources is equitable and all members are

physically and psychologically safe and secure" (Bell 2007, p. 1). The vision of social justice is complex, continuous, frustrating and overwhelming and, promotes changes that are necessary for contemporary schools. It entails actions that are "democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change" (Bell 2007, p. 2).

The holistic perspective of the space of social justice in education within such a complex configuration is graphically illustrated in figure 1. More specifically, social justice must be compressed within a force field of interacting push and pull forces as well as inhibitors. The push/pull forces consist of the historicity of the space wherein social justice is sought (family, school, community, state) and the social demands, expectations and agendas that actively promote a more just dispensation within the context, the international trends and discourses (e.g., globalisation, education for all, marketization of education etc.) and the dynamics of technological advances and economic imperatives for development and job creation. The very same push/pull forces can, however, also act as inhibitors of change.
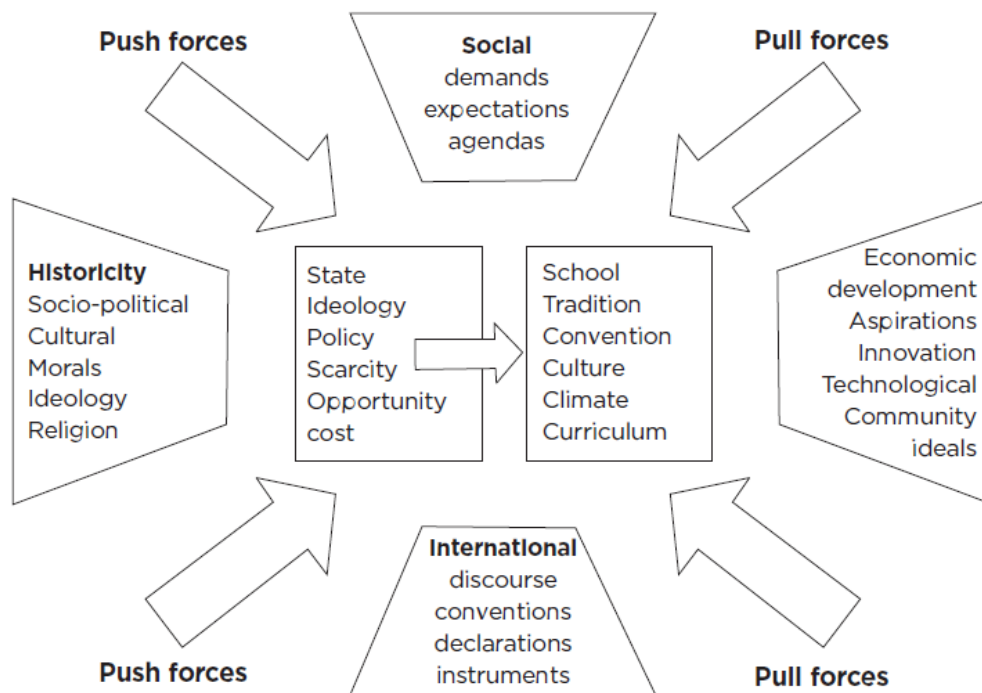

Push forces

Social
demands
expectations
agendas

Pull forces

Historicity
Socio-political
Cultural
Morals
Ideology
Religion

State
Ideology
Policy
Scarcity
Opportunity
cost

School
Tradition
Convention
Culture
Climate
Curriculum

Economic
development
Aspirations
Innovation
Technological
Community
ideals

International
discourse
conventions
declarations
instruments

Push forces

Pull forces

Figure 1 The space of social justice in education: a holistic perspective
(Source: Nieuwenhuis, 2010)

Promote democratic practices and social justice at school

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The aim of education is to provide young people with such opportunities and democratic experiences that will in turn lead to the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes, which will allow students to be informed, responsible citizens and participate in all the issues of the school community.

Many scientists support that a school's characteristics, the role of the school leader as well as administrative policies lead to the promotion of civic attitudes, which are important for both teachers and students. Thus, social justice at school does not happen by chance and, must be seen mostly as educational leadership's choice and strategic priority (Theoharis, 2007). In addition, teachers play a crucial role in preparing students to take on responsibilities. The basic principles to be followed within the classroom and aimed at social justice should be based on pupils' experiences, needs and interests. Students should look for ways to connect their personal experiences and wider society. Professor John West-Burnham points out that, democracy and citizenship cannot be taught but have to be learnt through authentic experience. To this point, Paulo Freire (2007) considers the process of critical reflection and tangible action as a very important process at school as long as it helps students learn "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35). Freire strongly criticized traditional methods of education, which he said mirrored an oppressive society as a whole. He argued that teachers should not, and cannot, hide their conceptions of justice. There are also strong arguments for raising particular perspectives or sides of an argument that have little exposure in society in order to broaden understanding of issues and allow all voices to be heard.

The extremely important role of the teacher greatly influences student performance, either directly or indirectly. Teaching and learning are social and relational processes (Shamsher et al., 2004). Therefore, it seems that the quality of teacher and student relationships is of great importance, which in turn affects students' performance. It therefore seems necessary not only for the proper initial education of teachers but also for their continuous training whenever new needs arise. In addition, the school leader must develop conditions for development and empowerment of his staff and help with his decisions on equality, equity, participation, dialogue and co-operation among the members of the organization. The school leader helps with his decisions on cooperativity between the members of the organization (Veugelers, 2007). Veugelers (2007) typically supports the notion of "school as a community". The school of culture and the community with pupils' identity development experiences, the school that promotes dialogue among students and encourages learning through co-

operation, the school where teachers participate in decision-making, is a democratic school.

Cohen et al. (2009), underline that, as far as democratic schools' function is concerned, social justice as well as the desire to get involved are among the most important skills and predispositions. Research reveals that the most importance factors affecting democratic processes in school are:

- Curricula (Kubow & Fischer, 2006 - Karakatsani, 2013)

- Educational leadership and democratic processes (Bäckman & Trafford, 2007 - Furman & Shields, 2005)

- Organizational justice (Vakola & Nicolaou, 2012, p. 175) - (Boyd et al., 2011) - (Eleftherakis, 2011)

- Participation in decision-making, behavior and effectiveness in the school organization (Bogler & Somech, 2005)

- The use of ICT (West-Burnham, 2011)

Capper et al. (2006) after studying 72 pieces of literature, support the notion of preparing leaders for social justice. They strongly believe in seven aspects of a framework. This framework must be attended to if preparation programs are to realize the full potential of leadership for social justice in their graduates. The two primary dimensions of the framework (i.e., the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment) that preparation programs engage with in order to develop the critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills of future leaders for social justice synergistically inform each other. School leaders must hear both teacher's voices and the voices of their students on critical social justice issues facing them. On his part, Ryan (2010) examined the promotion of social justice in schools through principals' political strategies. He suggests that principals need to acknowledge the importance of engaging in political activity in their organizations. Moreover, they need to combine their intellectual and strategic abilities with personal and social qualities (like courage, boldness and care) if they are to move their social justice agendas along.

The Research

Purpose and goals

The purpose of our research is to analyse the importance and the role of social justice perceived within educational communities through the investigation of teachers' opinions. In particular, the scope of this research is to analyze teachers' perception of everyday life at school in order to promote social justice and citizenship issues within Greek schools. Therefore, through this research we attempt to explore and describe teachers' perceptions regarding:

- the general framework of school's functioning as far as perceived social justice is concerned
- the way leader's practices are interconnected with social justice, equality, inclusion and citizenship
- leaders' role in establishing and promoting democratic practices at school
- curricula's and other educational activities' design and malfunctions.
- students' behavior and participation at school as far as the above issues are concerned

Methodological choices and demographic issues

To address the above research questions, we have chosen the quantitative method and distributed questionnaires with closed-type questions. Our sample consists of total 162 teachers (29 primary teachers & 133 secondary teachers). Moreover, our sample consists of 73 men (45.1%) and 89 women (54.9%). Most of the educators worked in Gymnasium (38.9%), 44 teachers worked in a vocational high school (27.2%), 29 teachers worked in primary school (17.9%) and 26 teachers worked in a high school (16%).

Results were statistically analyzed using the SPSS software (version 23 for Windows).

Results

The majority of our sample (51.2%) consists of teachers with a teaching experience of 11-20 years. Only a 9.3% (15 teachers) have over 30 years of experience in education.
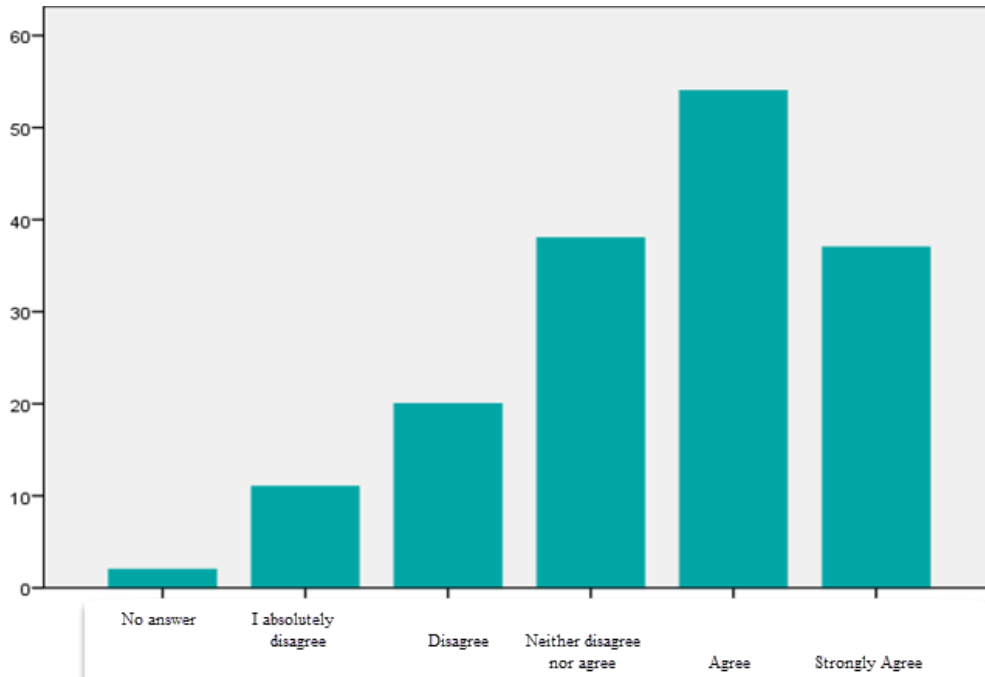
Diagram 1 School principal gives himself the first example of social justice

As we can see in Diagram 1, over half the teachers 56.1% agree on educational leaders' exemplary behavior, as far as social justice issues are concerned.
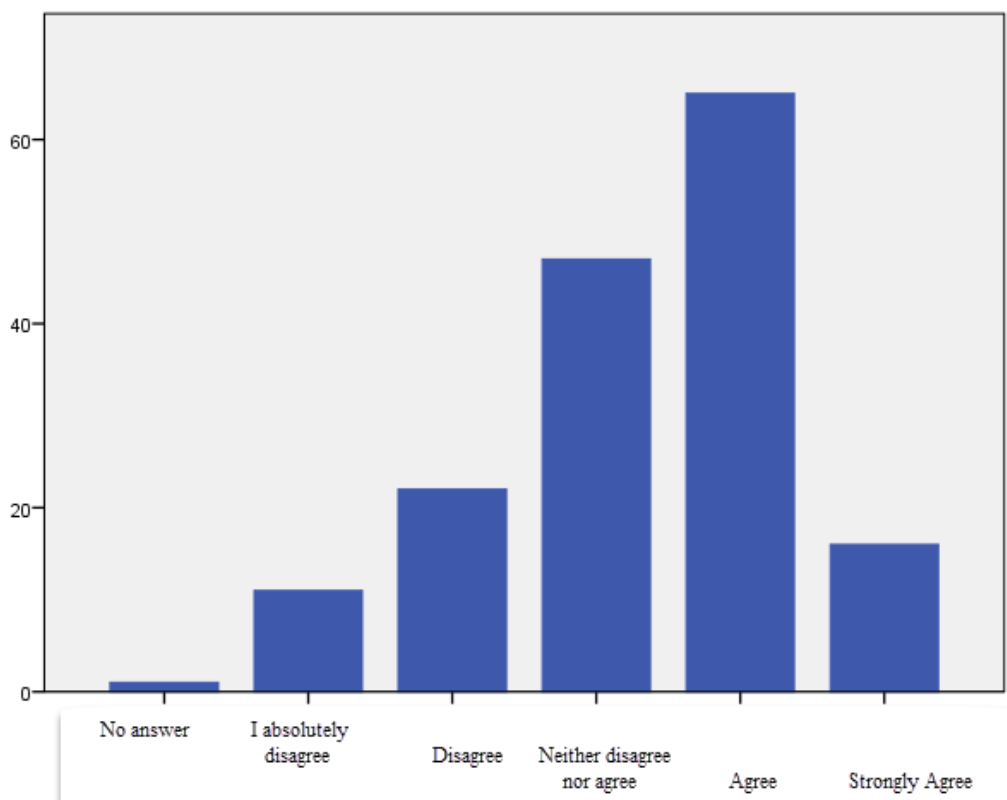

Diagram 2 Promoting fair social practices at school

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Teachers of our sample present a positive trend (50%) and, support the idea that socially fair practices are being promoted at school.

A high percentage of teachers - 43.9% (34.6% + 9.3%) considered that students did not express social racism behaviors, 24.1% disagreed with this view, whereas, 32.1% did not have a clear view on the issue.

A significant percentage of our sample- 57.4% (43.2% + 14.2%), considers that schools which have a solid culture foster democratic ideals. Interestingly, 25.9% of our sample express a neutral attitude while only 16.7% disagree.
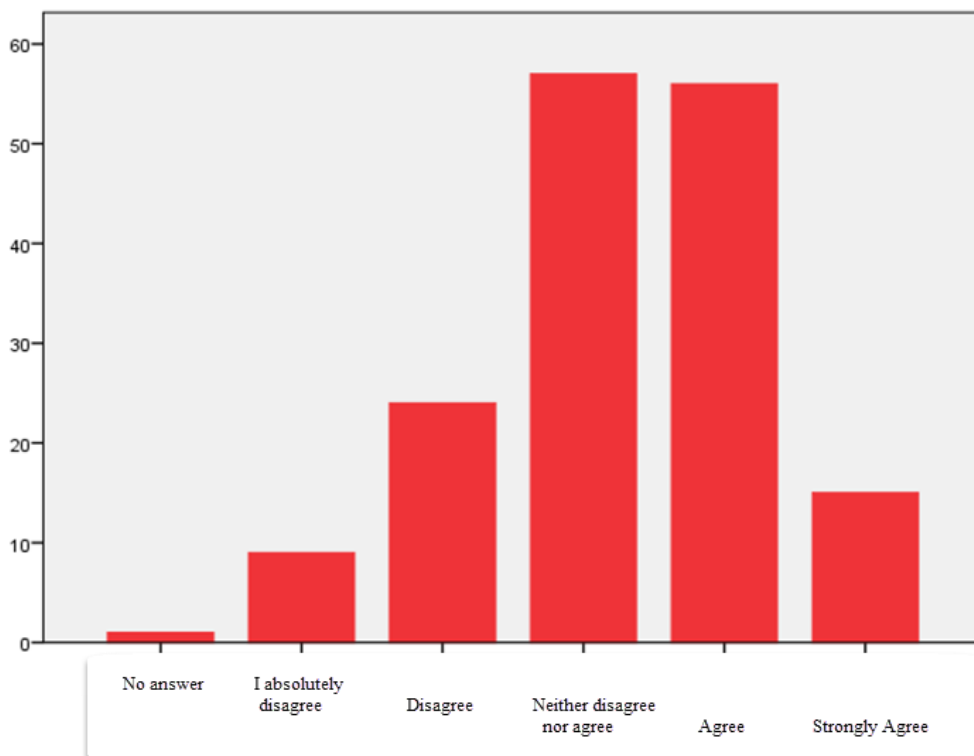

Diagram 3 Teachers' opinion regarding organizational justice

The positive trend is 43.9% (34.6% + 9.3%). Teachers agree that there is a certain sense of justice at their school. 35.2% of our sample does not have a clear response on whether there is a sense of organizational justice. Finally, 20.4% of teachers disagrees with this opinion. This positive trend leads us to conclude that justice in school is outweighed.

As we can see in Diagram 3, the results reveal that as far as social justice, citizenship activities and curricula are concerned, the most important problem is the lack of a cooperative culture, which would put the emphasis on these issues (68.5%), and the second most important problem is the lack of effective planning to address social racism problems (59.8%).

On the design of social justice and citizenship activities and the curriculum, which of the following, do you consider the most important problem you are currently facing at school?

	No answer	Important	Not important
Lack of effective planning to address bullying problems	14.80%	56.80%	28.40%
Lack of effective planning to address social racism problems	14.80%	59.80%	25.30%
Lack of interest from the manager on these issues	14.80%	22.90%	**62.40%**
Lack of interest on the part of teachers on these issues	14.20%	42.60%	43.30%
Lack of a culture of cooperation with an emphasis on these issues	13.60%	**68.50%**	17.90%
Unsatisfactory networking of the school with the community	14.80%	51.80%	33.30%
I have no problem	11.10%	46.90%	42.00%

Diagram 4. The most important problem teachers facing at school

Regarding the design of social justice and citizenship activities, teachers consider that, nowadays, the most important problem at school is that because of the curriculum, teachers are not allowed to act beyond their formal role with 59.80%.

Conclusion

Our research reveals that school leaders are perceived as being very interested in networking with the community and this seems to contradict the findings of Cohen's (2006) research, which considers that school leaders avoid to make bridges between the school and the school community. Teachers express positive views on the role of their school managers. As far as the promotion of democratic

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practices and cooperation from the school manager are concerned, our research shows that signs of democracy at school do exist (Furman & Shields, 2005; Bäckman & Trafford, 2007). The role of the director is perceived as encouraging: development of new pedagogical and teaching practices; cooperation at school (West-Burnham, 2011); networking with the community (Veugelers, 2007), active participation (Bogler & Somech, 200). Teachers strongly agree that volunteering is encouraged at school. It promotes citizenship (Gutiérrez & Lozano, 2012; Biesta, 2011) and eliminates negative social behaviors such as social exclusion and xenophobia (Karakatsani, 2005). As far as the connection of the school with the external environment is concerned, high positive values have been recorded, which contradict the legislative framework of education which is bureaucratic. Teachers also consider that the most important problem in planning new educational and pedagogic activities promoting social justice and citizenship is the fact that curricula do not allow teachers to act beyond their formal role (Karakatsani, 2013). Finally, the cultivation of active participation in various educational activities should be a central and essential element of democratic citizenship and social justice.

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