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Educating for Justice: Curricular Social Justice Education at Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

This study examined the efficacy of college and university outcomes that call for their students to have an understanding of justice before graduation. Situated at a small, religiously affiliated, private, four-year institution and utilizing its own “justice attribute” learning outcomes, this thesis considered the way that graduating students who have completed the “justice” designation understand justice and how they formed that particular understanding. In the end, this study found that students have an understanding of justice and social justice, but faculty members need to do more to translate this knowledge into skills for social change in order to become culturally competent in this area.

Introduction

The 1947 “Report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education” (otherwise known as the “Truman Report”) discussed how the United States would approach education in a post-World War II society. It reads as follows: “[i]t is commonplace to the democratic faith that education is indispensable to the maintenance and growth of freedom of thought, faith, enterprise, and association.”¹ Now, social justice education “contributes to a healthy society by transforming the public space of higher education into sites where empathy, equity, and democratic citizenship skills are cultivated.”² The importance of a democratic citizenry hasn’t changed since the time that the Truman Report was published but, as apparent in the Society of Jesus’ 32nd General Congregation, the role of justice in higher education has become even more relevant. The Truman Report recognized this early on, calling for education free from discrimination, and this is something that higher education still tackles on a regular basis.³ Therefore, taking its cues from this report, higher education “has an obligation to consider the necessity of and possibilities for justice.”⁴ Undergraduate education, in particular, is an important place in which social justice can and should be discussed. Simpson writes that this process of social justice education occurs through “identification of the material, analysis of the social, and an imagination for the ethical”⁵ and the nature of an undergraduate environment is

especially apt for breaking through traditional societal norms to see the institutional and systemic oppression that is present.

Ultimately, this has manifested itself in the responsibility that many post-secondary institutions have taken on to prepare their students for this diverse world, adding diversity-, multicultural-, and/or justice-oriented courses to the requirements of their core curricula or suggesting in their learning outcomes that their graduates will be versed in at least one, if not all, of these areas before they leave the institution. This paper will examine the efficacy of one such set of outcomes that call for students to have an understanding of justice before graduation. It will look in particular at a small, religiously affiliated, private, four-year institution, utilizing its own “justice attribute” learning outcomes as compared with data collected through interviews of graduating students who have completed courses with this designation.

Literature Review

Catholic Understandings of Justice

Since this study is situated at a Catholic, Jesuit institution, it is important to consider how these institutional demographic characteristics will affect an institution’s perception of “justice.” First, the Catholic catechism defines justice as “the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to

give their due to God and neighbor [...] Justice towards men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity.”⁶ This is not unlike Bell’s definition of a just society which has been used in both general and education-specific contexts. It states that the goal of a just society is “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs.”⁷ Furthermore, Catholic social teaching references the need for social structures to “promote each person’s opportunities to realize his or her full dignity,” which notes an important aspect of social justice.⁸ Power is “the ability to make decisions about how we live together,”⁹ existing both individually and institutionally.¹⁰ An individual wields power based on their privilege in society, and privilege in this context is associated with social group membership and the structure of the society in which one lives.¹¹ Together power and the privilege granting it form an inherent converse of the powerful and powerless. Catholic social teaching’s conception of social justice seeks to balance this relationship so that all have equal access to opportunities without having to utilize social capital granted to a person based on their group membership.

Jesuit Higher Education

Because this study will take place at a Jesuit institution, it is also important to look at the background of the Society of Jesus’ involvement in higher education. This paper will first consider the Jesuit mission of an institution and its relationship to justice before delving further into the involvement of justice in coursework. To begin, Roman College, which eventually became Gregorian University, was the first institution of Jesuit higher education in the world when it was founded in 1547.¹² These schools were conceived as “a work of charity,” according to the founder of the Society of Jesus, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and though education was not initially seen as a large part of their mission, by 1560 the Society of Jesus considered education to be its primary ministry.¹³ From this point, Jesuit education grew rapidly, and its purpose, as described by an early Jesuit, was rooted in the idea that “the proper education of youth will mean improvement of the whole world.”¹⁴

Jumping forward to the inclusion of “justice” and its implementation as an explicitly key characteristic of an experience of Jesuit education, the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus in 1975 spoke very clearly on the matter, beginning its 4th Decree by stating, “The mission of the Society of Jesus today is the service of the faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement.”¹⁵ The complementary norms of the Society of Jesus reads as follows on the matter: “The educational apostolate [...] is to be valued as of great importance among the ministries of the Society for promoting today’s mission in the service of the faith from which justice arises.”¹⁶ In terms of “justice” as a concept, it is explicitly linked with the “service of faith” as outlined in the above decree, and the 34th General Congregation offers the clearest reasoning for this, explaining that the Jesuit “vision of justice” is “deeply rooted in the Scriptures, Church tradition, and our Ignatian heritage. It transcends notions of justice derived from ideology, philosophy, or particular political movements.”¹⁷

The Characteristics of Jesuit Education (1986) clarified the fact that “[t]he goal of Jesuit education today is described in terms of the formation of ‘multiplying agents’ and ‘men and women for others.’”¹⁸ The term “men and women for others” was promulgated by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J., and, in a 1973 speech given to Jesuit alumni, he explained that this term referred to those who “cannot even conceive that love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors; men and women completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for others is a farce.”¹⁹ This concept grew in popularity, leading to its inclusion in the document *Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, which outlined three aspects of Jesuit education in which the concept of justice should be present: in the curriculum, in the policies and programs of the institution, and in the actions of those working at the school.²⁰

Additionally relevant to this thesis is the inclusion of justice in the curriculum. This excerpt from *Characteristics of Jesuit Education* offers the following on the subject of justice in the curriculum:

This may at times call for the addition of new courses; of greater importance is the

examination of the justice dimension always present in every course taught. Teachers try to become more conscious of this dimension so that they can provide students with the intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation that will enable them to make a commitment to service—that will make them agents of change. The curriculum includes a critical analysis of society adapted to the age level of the students; the outlines of a solution that is in line with Christian principles is a part of this analysis.²¹

The above was the most specific description of the inclusion of justice in an educational setting, lending greater context on how to incorporate it into the university. Furthermore, it stressed that justice should be involved specifically in the education of a student within the classroom, through activities occurring outside of it, and in the general behaviour of faculty and staff members. Hill Fletcher connects this to a contemporary understanding of social justice in the curriculum, stating “Jesuit education as justice education must include a curriculum of social analysis that can lead to social change [...] should include the historical and structural analyses of race, gender, and class as well as the invitation for self-transformation through the recognition of privilege.”²² This idea is similar to Hardiman and Jackson’s model due to its focus on individual development and movement into action for systemic change in society. Ultimately, this development culminates in a student’s consciousness of their own power and privilege in relation to others.

After the release of *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education*, educators called for a greater grounding of their approach to teaching in the origins of the Society of Jesus, and *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach* followed in 1993.²³ This text offered a way of proceeding by incorporating context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation into education.²⁴ Furthermore, it emphasized the importance of justice in the pedagogy of an educator. *Ignatian Pedagogy* also explained the importance of forming students in the service of the faith that does justice. If educational institutions are successful then in this pursuit, there will be a change in the ways that individuals

“live in the world, men and women of competence, conscience, and compassion, seeking the *greater good* in terms of what can be done out of a faith commitment with justice to enhance the quality of people’s lives.”²⁵ This result is not unlike the critical transformation phase of Aschuler’s theory, in which an individual is cognizant of their privilege in society and how they have taken part in the cycle of oppression.²⁶ In the end, the *Some Characteristics* document posits that, after having received this education, individuals would move into this stage through the “commitment with justice to enhance the quality of people’s lives.”²⁷

Furthermore, because of the creation of *The Characteristics of Jesuit Education* and *Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach*, the 34th General Congregation explicitly linked justice at the university to the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, which exist as documentation that serves as a foundation for all functions of the order in the same way that the *Ratio Studiorum* prescribed ways of proceeding for education. It states:

When understood in the light of faith which seeks justice, the criterion of ‘*greater need*’ toward places or situations of serious injustice; the criterion of ‘*more fruitful*’ towards ministry which can be effective in creating communities of solidarity; the criterion of ‘*more universal*’ towards action which contributes to structural change to create a society more based on shared responsibility.²⁸

The italicized portion of the decree refers to phrases found in the constitutions of the order and are found in the chapter, “The Missions Received from the Superior of the Society.”²⁹ This grounding of mission in the order’s history is important because it finds a modern mission of justice not unlike Bell’s definition, which is “a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Individuals are both self-determining and independent.”³⁰ In this “vision,” Bell suggested that there are six characteristics of oppression, which are pervasiveness, restricting, hierarchal, complex, internalized, and “isms.” These characteristics all note that oppression is embedded within a society and perpetuated

throughout its both subtle and overt effects on a person's life. Ideally, a student would be well-versed in each of these six characteristics of oppression and be able to notice their prominence in society.

The former Superior General of the Jesuits, Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., states that this decree mandated that students be able to better understand and act in the interest of the disadvantaged and the oppressed, finding a more equitable solution.³¹ This idea also nods to Hackman's tools for critical analysis in social justice education, one of which is "analyzing the effects of power and oppression [...] and inquiring into what alternatives exist with respect to the current, dominant view of reality of this issue."³² Furthermore, the Constitutions likewise demand the prioritization of a "more universal good" as a means of promoting a cycle of "goodness" in which those ministered to spread the mission, and when applying the 34th General Congregation's view of this "more universal good," a social justice education emerges to prioritize a more equitable society where students of Jesuit institutions will go and act justly.

Social Identity Development & Justice-Inclusive Education

Moving from this Jesuit-specific conception of justice to social identity development, several models are at play when talking about a student's orientation toward social justice. Included among these are the above mentioned Aschuler's theory of responding to oppression, Bell's theory of oppression, and the Hardiman and Jackson model. Each of these theories recognizes that all individuals experience varying levels of oppression based on different group memberships and that social identities may look differently for different individuals. Ultimately, all of these models work to increase awareness about the structure of society, breaking down power and privilege for both the oppressed and the oppressor.

Moving from identity development to models of justice-inclusivity as referenced above, Hackman suggests that there are five essential components for social justice education, but the ways that they are articulated vary from model to model.³³ Goodman, for example, has put forth the Cultural Competence for Social Justice (CCSJ) model, in

which one becomes more aware of their own identity, much like Hardiman and Jackson's resistance stage and Watt's recognizing privileged identity stage.³⁴ Goodman also emphasizes the importance of "understanding and valuing others," "knowledge of social inequities," "skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts," and "skills to foster equity and inclusion[.]"³⁵ While her model is not necessarily linear, the breakdown of awareness, knowledge, and skills forms a foundation for social justice education to be used in a variety of different ways. Additionally, it also nods to Watt's position that one cannot reach an end in social justice education. Rather, an individual should continuously develop in each of these areas. Bearing these models in mind and combining them with social identity development theories, the pedagogical frameworks behind social justice education create effective teaching strategies to allow students to move through these processes and become more social-justice oriented.

Hill Fletcher notes that justice learning has three elements: academic, civic, and eudemonic.³⁶ When talking about social justice in the classroom, there is the necessity of traditional classroom resources, such as reading, but it is also important to take into consideration the community in which learning is taking place and a student's personal development. Echoing the Truman Report's position that education is "indispensable" to the creation of a democratic citizenship, Hill Fletcher contextualizes that social education is directly related to the development of society.³⁷ Additionally, Mayhew and Fernandez conducted a study specifically centered around the utility of social justice pedagogical foundations and determined that "students exposed to course content dealing with systematic oppression, the societal structures, and inequalities that causes and sustain it, and how individuals perpetuate and/or discourage its reproduction were more likely to achieve social justice-related outcomes than students enrolled in courses with less sociologic approaches to understanding contemporary society problems."³⁸ Social justice proficiency was also increased by building upon in-class reflection through engagement in discussions of these ideas outside of the classroom.³⁹

Furthermore, Adams et al. place emphasis on a pedagogical framework for social justice education that connects the emotional and cognitive components of learning, recognizes the personal dimension of experience while still educating on the systemic dynamics of social group interactions, utilizes reflection and personal experience, and affirms changes in awareness and growth as outcomes in the process.⁴⁰ Important to note here is the fact that these elements focus primarily on what students themselves bring into the classroom rather than necessarily traditional educational materials. Additionally, most of the learning that takes place stems not only from the educator's own articulation of their identity development but also from reflection.

Gaps in the Literature

St. Clair and Groccia state that institutions should “[c]ommit to a vision for social justice education that is likely to fit within the institution’s culture, select a change process that is participatory and collaborative, and ensure that leadership is powerful enough to establish collaboration and realize the vision[.]”⁴¹ By involving social justice education on an institutional level, colleges and universities must be realistic about their ability to produce graduates who are indeed versed in concepts in that area. While many of these studies considered social justice-oriented courses taught at institutions of higher education, there is limited research on the incorporation of justice into the core curriculum and, by extension, on the efficacy of colleges and universities that do so to produce graduates who understand social justice.

Considering social justice outcomes on a college-wide level begs a variety of questions on how that will manifest itself in student learning and if there is a way to ensure that students retain their understanding of social justice over the course of their collegiate career and beyond. As Watt suggests that this process is continuous, is there a way for colleges and universities to ensure that students who take social justice education courses maintain and/or grow their involvement in social justice, whether that be through education and/or advocacy?⁴² Furthermore, not a lot of studies have been completed in this area with the focus on a Catholic or a Catholic, Jesuit campus, and so the way that these contexts may affect students’ understandings of justice has not been explored.

Research Questions

R1. Having completed a course with a “justice attribute,” what are students’ understanding of “justice” as a concept? Does their understanding differ across the disciplines in which they took their Justice course?

R2. What other factors contributed to their understanding of justice/social justice and are those factors related to university-sponsored activities?

Methodology and Design

The objective of this study was to examine a student’s conception of justice after having taken a course with learning goals specifically oriented toward educating them around the concept of “justice.” For the institution studied, this meant utilizing its “justice attribute” courses as a means of satisfying this requirement.

Research Context

This study was completed at a small, private, four-year Catholic, Jesuit institution of higher education. The enrollment at the institution at the time of the study was approximately 2,400 undergraduate students.⁴³ All students taking a traditional core curriculum (i.e. non-All-College Honors Program students) are required to take a course with a “justice attribute” designation that has been approved by the Core Curriculum Committee. The learning goals for these courses are as follows:

Content

Goal: Students will demonstrate an understanding of justice, its relationship to power, and the ways in which causes of injustice may be mitigated and justice promoted.

Skills

Goal: Students will think critically about the factors that create, permit, and/or mitigate the conditions of justice or injustice.

Both the Content and Skills goals are clearly connected to the institution’s Jesuit identity, in that the focus of each aspires to create students who will be able “to perceive, think, judge,

choose, and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed.”⁴⁴ They also return to the ideas of creating “agents of change” who “are committed to working for the freedom and dignity of all peoples[.]”⁴⁵ Furthermore, since awareness, knowledge, and skills form the basis of Goodman’s Cultural Competency for Social Justice model and these objectives focus explicitly on content (knowledge) and skills, this study included questions that will address their own social identities in regards to class to see if the awareness aspect of Goodman’s model is included.⁴⁶

Research Design

By its very nature, “qualitative research begins with [...] the study of research problems inquiring into the mean individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem[.]”⁴⁷ This was a qualitative study, which, per Creswell, is conducted to “understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issues” and “because quantitative measures and the statistical analysis simply do not fit the problem[.]”⁴⁸ In this particular study, participants phrased their responses regarding their understandings of justice and how they understood this concept in a variety of ways, so, thinking about the roles that higher education and the curriculum, a qualitative study was the most appropriate for understanding how students talked about justice, especially for the variability in the terms that they utilized to explain their definitions and the often personal experiences that led to these understandings. Approaching this from a qualitative standpoint allowed for flexibility in asking follow-up questions to better understand objectively what participants meant by their explanations.

Research Participants

Students were asked to complete a brief demographic survey in addition to the consent form, which included which class they took to complete their “justice attribute.” This allowed data to be collected regarding which justice attribute course(s) they took, when they took it (them), and their major of study. Twelve students were recruited through a convenience sample. The median grade point average of those interviewed

was 3.25. Nine of the twelve students’ primary major was in the College of Arts and Sciences at the institution, two students came from the School of Education and Human Services, and one student was from the Business School. The majority of students took a philosophy course in order to fulfill their “justice attribute” requirement.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. This allowed for a uniformity of questions but offered the flexibility to ask questions regarding students’ particular understandings and experiences. The questions are as follows:

1. Why did you come to [this institution]?
2. What clubs and organizations are you involved in? Are you involved in any organizations off-campus?
3. What is your understanding of justice or social justice?
4. What has informed your understanding of justice?
5. How has your understanding of justice impacted your daily life?
6. What would you like to do after graduation? Why?

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a phenomenological approach, which “describes the meaning for several individuals of their *lived experience* of a concept or phenomenon[.]”⁴⁹ In this case, the concept was “justice.” After speaking with the individuals, the data was transcribed, analyzed, and organized across five different themes answering the research questions posed by the study.

Results

The findings of this study have been organized according to themes surrounding the participants’ understanding of justice, what contributed to it, the role of Jesuit values in their responses, the role of ethics in the discussions had about justice, and students’ post-graduation plans.

Right/Wrong vs. Equality/Fairness

Most students understood justice as having to do with concepts of “right” and “wrong” while their understanding of social justice was primarily concerned with “fairness” and “equality.” As students explained their definitions of each of these concepts, this became a distinct factor in distinguishing the two. Seven of the participants followed this pattern explicitly. One mentioned the idea of something being “fair” in her definition of justice specifically while, for her, social justice alludes to the concept of opportunity as necessary to equality. Another was unable to give a definition, and another still stressed the importance of safety of individuals in his two explanations. Some students, as they progressed through their interview, utilized “justice” and “social justice” interchangeably. Additionally, a few also pointed out that their understanding of justice led to a behaviour change. When thinking on whether the concept affects their daily lives, there were mixed answers.

In thinking about the learning goals of “justice attribute” courses outlined by the institution’s Core Curriculum Committee, the majority of students seemed successfully able to still meet the goals associated with these classes, even though all were at least one semester removed from having taken the course. First, looking at the Content Goal of the attribute, which reads, “[s]tudents will demonstrate an understanding of justice, its relationship to power, and the ways in which causes of injustice may be mitigated and justice promoted,” the majority of students were able to articulate their definition of justice, discuss “power” in terms of fairness and equality (though none mentioned that term explicitly), and provide an example of a circumstance in which justice came into play. The one student who was unable to accomplish the first two parts of this task was able to provide an example of “justice” from his own understanding. This means that the participants seemed capable of meeting this portion of the learning goal.

Personal Experience & Coursework

When asked what most helped to form their understanding of justice, many students pointed to their coursework, to their personal experiences, or

to some combination thereof. To be clear, these personal experiences ranged from experiences of injustice or justice in work settings, of their institution in general, of specifically the service-immersion programs provided by the institution, and of other activities that affected students in some way. Six students mentioned their justice coursework in particular. Five mentioned their personal experiences as necessary to coming to their understanding of justice, and two noted that the institution was critical to the development of it.

The Role of Jesuit Values

Four students referenced the Jesuit values in their respective interviews. These students tended to be more involved in extracurricular activities. Two explicitly mentioned the Jesuit concept of the *magis*, that is, the “more,” and the concept of being a “man or woman for and with others.”

The Role of Ethics

Several students made references to ethics or philosophy either in their understanding of justice, their comments on the settings in which justice has been most discussed for them, or in articulating what contributes to their understanding of the concept. Again, the majority of these students took a philosophy course in order to cover their “justice attribute.” The references made to ethics were passing and made without prompting. Some of the connections were as simple as “I’ve taken other ethics classes.” Others specifically related that justice and social justice were distinctly related to ethics as conceptions.

Post-Graduation Findings

Half of the students interviewed mentioned wanting to pursue post-graduation plans that would improve society or have an explicitly positive impact after graduation. Others stated that they wanted to continue their schooling or to pursue a career as well but did not connect this to their understanding of justice.

Limitations

This study was limited by the fact that not many institutions possess a course with a specific “justice attribute” rather than a course that combines diversity and justice as focal concepts, and so that may have had an effect on the results and affects the study’s ability to be replicated because the “justice attribute” may not be found in other contexts. Furthermore, this study was limited by the fact that students were not selected based on which “justice attribute” course they took but rather on their completion of the requirement. A wider diversity of “justice attribute” courses would lend itself to examining across disciplines how students perceive the concept as well as to see if the outcomes are met universally across fields. Furthermore, the interviews relied on students’ memories, which is effective in considering how much knowledge they had about social justice as they prepared for graduation but may not accurately reflect all of the material covered in the course.

Discussion

The inclusion of justice in the curriculum is an opportunity for students to better navigate the world in which they live and challenges them to consider the perspectives of others. Mitchell notes that questions of justice “are not easy questions, nor do they have any certain and universally accepted answers. But Jesuit institutions today feel compelled by their tradition to raise these questions for their students [...] in a way that is proper for higher education: through learning, research, reflection, and imagination.”⁵⁰ While Mitchell’s assertion that there are no distinct answers to questions of justice that are “universally accepted,” this study utilized the definitions laid out at the beginning of this thesis as the framework for consideration when looking at how students articulated justice.

First, students’ definitions of justice are relatively consistent with widely accepted definitions, such as Bell’s and that of the Catholic Church. Neither is surprising, considering the former is considered one of the foremost definitions of “justice” when talking about justice education and the latter is consistent with the tradition of the institution. Again, Bell’s definition of social justice is “a vision

of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable, and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. Individuals are both self-determining and independent.”⁵¹ Per the understanding of the justice theme outlined above, many students touched on ideas of “fairness” and equality” when talking about social justice in particular. Only one student discussed the importance of community and safety. He stated that “social justice is [...] the chance to translate that more into the student body and making sure that everyone feels safe and at home.” Furthermore, none of the participants mentioned anything similar to the second clause of Bell’s definition, in which individuals are both self-determining and independent. To the students, it is possible that they consider both characteristics as automatic when talking about equality.

Then, turning to the Catholic Church’s definition of justice: “the moral virtue that is consistent in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor [...] Justice towards men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good.”⁵² Removing this definition from a religious context, only one student focused specifically on “equity.” This student stressed the importance of considering the extent to which students in urban classrooms have access to technology, insisting that a teacher must consider this access when assigning homework, as while some students are able to utilize it, some may not be. To this student, this meant finding an equitable solution in which all students could use the same learning strategy in and out of the classroom. This is the closest to Bell’s assertion that an individual must be self-determining that any of the participants reached, it correlated most closely with equity in terms of access to resources that can be seen in the Catholic Church’s definition of justice. With only one student highlighting this, one can wonder about how deeply they have committed to “justice” if their definitions do not extend in further consideration of what it means for an individual to live in a just society.

Furthermore, Hackman articulated the importance of “analyzing the effects of the power and

oppression [...] and inquiring into what alternatives exist with respect to the current, dominant view of reality of this issue[.]”⁵³ Only two students mentioned the way in which individuals come to break down their understandings of systemic oppression. For one student, this was done through a service immersion trip to another city in the same state. Her reference to the “why” question of what the “root problems” of an issue were is consistent with Hill Fletcher’s finding that changing the perspective on charity “requires a justice-curriculum that unveils subconscious stereotyping, analyzes the history of system structures of oppression, and provides tools for social analysis towards social change.”⁵⁴ This student was not the only student who had attended a service trip through her institution’s ministry office but was the only to draw on this particular experience explicitly when articulating what her understanding of justice was and where it came from. The utilization of this sort of experience is consistent with the findings of Flores et al. and Hertzell Campbell et al., which argued for the importance of hands-on, service-oriented learning when discussing issues of justice and diversity.⁵⁵ Likewise, one student’s experience with service learning contributed directly to the impact of justice on her daily life, and she noted that she no longer thinks about it as much, but “when I did service learning when I was in Gender & Philosophy which really helped with daily life and then I was there to help.” She also included a discussion of her service learning site when she was giving an example of social justice, noting more clearly the results of systematic inequalities by referencing the fact that the individuals served were people of colour and in need of mental health care while many individuals of her skin colour did not experience the same problems at the same rate.

While another’s experience of thinking of justice on a daily basis did not continue beyond that, it is clear from her interview that she is better able to articulate the differences in privilege between races. Furthermore, her post-graduation plans were ones that sought to provide better access to 3D models of vertebrate to the public “to be experienced.” Two other students felt similarly that they would do something for the greater good of society.

These experiences additionally all had reflective elements. This is consistent with Mayhew and Fernandez who noted that “regardless of course content, pedagogical practices related to discussions of diversity and opportunities for reflection significantly contributed to explaining how students understood issues related to justice[.]”⁵⁶ Based on Mayhew and Fernandez’s findings and the ability of the majority of participants in this study to articulate an understanding of justice, it is likely that some sort of reflection was going on in each of these courses. Furthermore, just as Mayhew and Fernandez note that this was something was occurring regardless of course content, this is consistent with the changing nature of the “justice attribute” courses, which are taught across disciplines.

Moving from this awareness to what constitutes social justice cultural competence, Goodman’s CCSJ model suggests that there are five levels through which students move in order to have cultural competence. They are as follows:

1. Self-awareness
2. Understanding and valuing others
3. Knowledge of social inequities
4. Skills to interact effectively with a diversity of people in different contexts
5. Skills to foster equity and inclusion⁵⁷


The participants in this study suggest that, in accomplishing the content and skill goals of their institution’s “justice attribute,” they have moved through the first three levels of this model. However, it is unclear if they possess the skills in order “to interact effectively” or “foster equity and inclusion” based on the style of the courses which they used to fulfill the requirement. Three students who were interested in a justice-oriented post-graduation plan suggested that they have moved effectively through these stages toward social action. This is consistent with Miller et al.’s finding that those who demonstrate an interest in social justice will affect their desire to partake in social justice-related activities.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Fr. Pedro Arrupe of the Society of Jesus espoused that value of *cura personalis* as he spoke in 1973, saying, “Today our prime educational objective must be to form men-and-women-for-others[...]men and women who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbors.”⁵⁹ Students at the institution in this study spoke to the importance of the Jesuit values in their understanding of justice, and the ramifications of this study certainly can lend themselves to institutions identifying as Jesuit and/or Catholic as well as institutions of all types.

Keeping this in mind, this study offers potential in understanding the way that students tend to perceive “justice” as a concept and how institutions might utilize a social justice curriculum through their liberal arts education. In the results, it was clear that students’ understandings of justice come from a variety of experiences both in and outside of the classroom. Their understandings seemed to effectively meet the learning goals espoused by the institution as well as the first three areas of the Cultural Competence for Social Justice Model espoused by Goodman. Taking this into consideration, there is a better understanding of how students are educated about justice, but

this study, as mentioned above, recommends that higher education institutions build on this to further their understanding of multicultural education as well as their ability to “interact effectively with a diversity of people” and “foster equity and inclusion[.]”⁶⁰ Furthermore, this study also highlighted that several students were able to articulate the importance of equality while simultaneously differentiating between justice and social justice, with a majority of participants relating the former to a more concrete division of “right and wrong” and the latter to ideas of “fairness.”

Finally, this study unexpectedly found how post-graduation plans were split for those participating: half of the students did not have plans relating to social change, while the other half wished to engage in some sort of social change and/or advocacy work. In considering the role of education in this, there is certainly more research to be done, but it is apparent that, for some, there has certainly been an impact made because of their perceptions of justice, demonstrating that the institution has had some, if not a major, effect on their graduates’ consideration of justice. Continued investigation of this topic will lead institutions to better understand how they can best educate for justice, continuing Fr. Arrupe’s mandates to institutions of the Jesuit persuasion. 

Notes

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