



Social Justice and Educational Action: Reflections from Critical Social Education in Contexts of Structural Inequality

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Abstract:

This article proposes a critical review of the implications of social justice as an ethical, political and educational horizon in the field of social education. Based on the analysis of Montané's (2015) base text, the main theoretical approaches that support the idea of justice beyond its legal dimension are systematized, linking it to processes of recognition, participation, and human capacities. The discussion is contextualized in the tensions generated by the globalized neoliberal model, which has weakened the role of the State as a guarantor of rights, deepening inequalities and limiting the real possibilities of subjects to access dignified living conditions. In this framework, it is proposed that social education must recover its transformative role, articulating knowledge, practices and resistances that contribute to emancipation and the strengthening of individual and collective capacities. The urgency of rethinking socio-educational interventions from a relational logic, situated and committed to equity, is emphasized, as well as the need to promote forms of cognitive and cultural justice in the educational field. This reflection provides conceptual and practical elements to strengthen the impact of social education in the construction of more democratic and just societies.

Keywords:

Social justice, social education, capacities, recognition, participation, inequality, equity.

Introduction

In contemporary scenarios marked by the exacerbation of social, economic and cultural inequalities, social justice has emerged as an inescapable category in debates on the role of education in the transformation of society. Far from being an abstract ideal, social justice challenges daily practices, public policies and educational models from a perspective that requires a critical review of the structural conditions that reproduce exclusion, marginality and inequality. This notion transcends the traditional conception focused on the distribution of resources, to incorporate other dimensions such as recognition, participation, voice and autonomy of the subjects. In this context, social education is a privileged field of action to problematize persistent injustices and generate alternatives that promote the dignity, well-being and real inclusion of historically silenced groups.

The need to rethink social justice in an educational key acquires special relevance in territories such as those of Latin America, crossed by deep economic and cultural asymmetries, as well as by historical processes of colonization, racialization and structural violence. In this framework, justice cannot be understood only from a distributive logic, but must be articulated with the recognition of differences and the expansion of capacities to exercise full citizenship. Following authors such as Fraser (2008), Sen (2000) and Nussbaum (2006), it is recognized that justice implies, in addition to material redistribution, effective access to speech, representation, quality education, respect for diverse identities and the right to imagine other possible futures. Consequently, social education must be positioned as an ethical and political practice that contributes to the strengthening of the social fabric and the construction of more equitable community ties.

Based on these considerations, this article proposes a grounded reflection on the meaning and challenges of social justice in the field of social education, taking as a reference the analysis proposed by Montané (2015) and articulating it with contemporary theoretical frameworks on human capacities, mutual recognition, subjectivity and power. It is based on the hypothesis that justice cannot be reduced to a normative or technical problem, but must be approached from a relational logic, in which the complexity of educational processes, the heterogeneity of the subjects and the structural dimension of inequalities are recognized. In this sense, it is necessary to rethink socio-educational interventions from criteria of contextualization, horizontality and cognitive justice, understanding that educational practices have the potential to reinforce or question the dominant forms of exclusion.

Social education, as a situated field of knowledge and practice, becomes a key tool for intervening on the margins of the system, where access to rights has historically been denied or limited. Therefore, more than a welfare or complementary function, social education must assume a transformative role that materializes in the accompaniment of community processes, the generation of emancipatory pedagogical alternatives and the vindication of the subject as an active agent in the dispute for the meaning of the common. This perspective requires a critical review of the place occupied by the social education professional in contexts traversed by precariousness, institutional control and bureaucratic management of poverty. The

challenge, then, is to recover a complex perspective, situated and committed to social struggles, which allows for the reconfiguration of interventions based on mutual recognition, respect for difference and the expansion of the conditions for a dignified life.

From this approach, the article seeks to provide elements to resignify social justice as a living, relational and situated category, with the capacity to guide educational practices beyond formal discourses. In this sense, it is argued that justice can only materialize when the subjectivity of the other is recognized, when conditions of effective participation are guaranteed, and when training processes are articulated that enhance human capacities in contexts of freedom, care, and reciprocity. To this end, the text is organized around a theoretical discussion that intertwines different contemporary perspectives, a critical reflection on the challenges of social education in environments of exclusion, and a series of considerations aimed at strengthening the transformative role of the social educator as an agent of justice.

Theoretical foundation

Social justice, understood as a central category in the social sciences and in contemporary political thought, has evolved from a strictly distributive vision – based on equity in the distribution of goods and material resources – to a more complex, relational and multidimensional understanding. This evolution has been promoted by authors such as **Nancy Fraser (2008)**, who argues that justice cannot be limited to the economic level, but must be articulated with the recognition of cultural identities and effective political participation. In his three-dimensional model, Fraser argues that the redistribution of resources, the recognition of differences, and equitable representation are interdependent conditions for the achievement of truly inclusive justice. This perspective is particularly relevant to the field of social education, as it allows us to understand that the inequalities faced by subjects are not only expressed in material shortages, but also in the invisibilization of their voices, knowledge, and ways of life.

From another perspective, the theory of capabilities developed by **Amartya Sen (2000)** and expanded by **Martha Nussbaum (2006)** introduces an ethical approach that focuses attention on what people can do and be, that is, on their real opportunities to deploy a valuable life project. Unlike models that measure justice based on access to goods, this theory focuses on the substantive freedom of individuals to choose, act, and participate in dignified conditions. For Sen, equality should not be evaluated only from distribution, but from the effective freedoms that people have to develop their capacities in certain social contexts. Nussbaum, for his part, proposes an open list of basic human capacities – such as life, bodily integrity, affiliation, play, thought, among others – that must be guaranteed as ethical minimums by democratic societies. In an educational key, this approach implies a commitment to a pedagogy that not only instructs, but also broadens horizons of possibility and strengthens the agency of the subjects in their environment.

Both theoretical frameworks converge with the proposal of **cognitive justice** put forward by **Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010)**, who claims the need to recognize the epistemic diversity of the world as a constitutive part of the struggle for social

justice. From this perspective, knowledge is neither neutral nor universal, but situated, culturally mediated and politically contested. In the field of education, this vision implies a critique of the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge and an opening towards ancestral, popular, community and experiential forms of knowledge that have historically been marginalized by the formal education system. Cognitive justice, then, demands that teaching-learning processes value the epistemologies of the South, listen to the voices of subaltern subjects, and build bridges between knowledge that dignify the life trajectories of those who have been systematically excluded. For social education, this approach represents a call to critically review its own knowledge matrices and to construct pedagogical devices that legitimize situated knowledge as a tool for transformation.

In this same sense, the category of recognition proposed by **Axel Honneth (2009)** provides key elements to understand the link between identity, dignity and justice. For Honneth, recognition is not a simple symbolic act, but a structural condition for the development of subjectivity and social participation. The author identifies three spheres of recognition: love (linked to affectivity), law (related to legal respect) and solidarity (associated with the social value of individual contributions). The denial or absence of recognition in any of these spheres generates forms of moral suffering that affect self-esteem and limit the subjects' capacity for agency. From an educational perspective, this implies that pedagogical practices must offer conditions for students, especially those in vulnerable situations, to feel validated in their experiences, respected in their rights and valued in their contributions, which constitutes a pillar for the construction of fair pedagogical relationships.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the ethical and political implications of these frameworks in the exercise of **social education** as a transformative practice. Far from being a mere intervention technique, social education is conceived as a form of pedagogical accompaniment that recognizes the historicity of subjects, their inscription in contexts of structural inequality and their potential for individual and collective transformation. In this sense, it is aligned with the approaches of **Paulo Freire (1997)**, who argued that all educational practice is political and that the educator must assume a critical stance in the face of the injustices of the world. Social education, from this perspective, is not limited to managing needs, but promotes processes of awareness, community organization, recovery of memory and construction of emancipatory alternatives. In territories such as Córdoba and other Latin American scenarios, where multiple forms of exclusion converge, social education has the responsibility to contribute to social justice through situated pedagogical practices, dialogic and committed to human dignity.

Methodology

This article is framed in a qualitative approach of an essayistic and reflective type, oriented to argumentative construction based on documentary analysis, the critical review of specialized literature and the systematization of relevant theoretical categories in the field of social education and social justice. It is not an empirical research based on data collected in the field, but a theoretical elaboration based on contemporary conceptual frameworks that dialogue with the current challenges of socio-educational intervention in contexts of structural inequality.

The methodological strategy adopted consisted of an interpretative reading of key theoretical sources, articulating contributions from authors such as Nancy Fraser, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Axel Honneth, Paulo Freire and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, among others. These references were selected for their conceptual relevance in relation to current debates on social justice, recognition, human capacities, epistemologies of the South, and emancipatory education. Likewise, reflections derived from the analysis of the base text of Montané (2015) were integrated, which offers a powerful framework to rethink the function of social education as an action committed to equity, inclusion and human dignity.

The analytical procedure was based on the triangulation of theoretical perspectives with findings from previous research in social education, as well as on the critical contextualization of the concepts discussed in relation to the realities of Latin America, and specifically of Colombia. From this triangulation, interpretative categories were developed that made it possible to identify tensions, challenges and projections of social education as a practice oriented to justice. These categories—such as redistribution, recognition, participation, cognitive justice, and subjectivity—were approached from a relational approach, avoiding disciplinary reductionism and seeking to maintain the complexity of the phenomena analyzed.

The writing of the article was assumed as a political-pedagogical exercise, as it implied the taking of a critical position in the face of the structural conditions that configure educational practices and in the face of the normative frameworks that regulate social intervention. It is recognized, therefore, that all analysis is situated, that is, traversed by the experiences, knowledge and commitments of the author, which enriches the interpretation and makes it a living contribution to the field of transformative pedagogical thought. From this position, priority was given to a clear but rigorous language, which allows the theoretical categories to be brought closer to the practical realities of those who exercise social education in contexts of exclusion and inequality.

Results

The theoretical analysis carried out allowed the identification of a series of relevant conceptual findings that configure an interpretative framework to understand the challenges of social justice in the field of social education. In the first place, it was evident that social justice cannot be understood only from its distributive dimension, associated with access to material goods, but must be approached as a relational construction that articulates the recognition of differences, effective participation and the guarantee of conditions for the full development of human capacities. This multidimensional approach makes it possible to overcome the compensatory or welfare-based approaches that have predominated in social intervention, and instead, to claim an education aimed at strengthening the autonomy, dignity and agency of the subjects.

Second, it was identified that contemporary social policies, especially those promoted in neoliberal contexts, tend to fragment socio-educational interventions and reduce their field of action to the management of populations labeled as "vulnerable". This tendency contributes to depoliticizing the role of the social

educator, placing it in a logic of technical execution rather than in a transformative pedagogical function. In contrast, the critical approaches reviewed in this article—particularly the theories of Fraser, Sen, Nussbaum, Honneth, and Freire—highlight the need to recover the political character of social education, understood as a space for the collective construction of emancipatory meanings, knowledge, and horizons.

Another central finding was the realization that social justice requires the recognition of epistemic plurality as a condition for democratic dialogue. In this sense, the notion of cognitive justice acquires special relevance in contexts such as Latin America, where the colonality of knowledge has historically operated as a mechanism for the invisibilization of indigenous, Afro-descendant, popular and peasant knowledge. Social education, therefore, is called upon to generate pedagogical spaces in which this knowledge can circulate, be validated and articulated with formative practices that dignify the life trajectories of the subjects. This recognition is not only epistemological, but also ethical, since it implies assuming that all subjects have the right to produce and share knowledge from their situated experience.

Finally, the need to transform the modes of relationship in which educational practices are inscribed was identified as an emerging result. Social justice, in this framework, cannot be limited to an abstract or normative goal, but must be manifested in the way in which pedagogical links are constructed, in the way in which the word is distributed, in respect for the rhythms and forms of learning, and in the commitment to create environments where participation is not tolerated, but actively promoted. These results allow us to conclude that social education, when guided by an ethic of care, recognition and equity, can become a powerful tool for social transformation and the construction of fairer horizons.

Discussion

The conceptual results obtained in this essay allow us to reaffirm the need to position social justice as a transversal and non-negotiable axis of contemporary social education. Based on the theoretical articulation between the approaches of human capacities (Sen and Nussbaum), recognition justice (Fraser and Honneth), cognitive justice (Santos) and critical pedagogy (Freire), a complex framework of interpretation is built that contributes to denaturalizing the logics of exclusion that operate both in social policies and in educational practices. This plural approach makes it possible to overcome the welfare and compensatory conceptions that still survive in many social intervention programs, which tend to reduce subjects to functional categories such as "beneficiaries", "users" or "target populations", ignoring their agency, their history and their right to participate in the construction of knowledge and the community fabric.

One of the most significant contributions of this discussion is the recognition of social justice as a daily practice that is expressed in the way in which pedagogical links are established and in how real opportunities for participation are distributed. From this perspective, educating for justice is not a programmatic statement, but an ethical commitment that is concretized in every educational act, in every encounter with the other, in every decision about who is listened to, what knowledge is

validated, and what forms of life are considered worthy of being named. In this sense, the work of the social educator moves from the mere implementation of strategies to the construction of training processes that dignify existence and enable new horizons of possibility. This position dialogues with the notion of liberating education proposed by **Freire (1997)**, in which teaching is not about transferring knowledge, but about creating the conditions for the other to discover his or her capacity to act on reality.

Likewise, the discussion shows that social justice cannot be thought of outside the historical, cultural and territorial contexts in which educational intervention is developed. The structural conditions of inequality in Latin America, the persistence of colonial matrices of power, the precariousness of life and the epistemic exclusion of popular and ancestral knowledge configure a scenario in which social education has the challenge of resisting and proposing. From the perspective of **Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010)**, this requires a commitment to cognitive justice, that is, to the democratization of knowledge and openness to the epistemic diversity that inhabits the margins of the formal education system. This dimension is particularly relevant for out-of-school training processes, where social education can act as a bridge between languages, memories and collective projects.

On the other hand, the discussion recovers the value of the theory of capabilities as a criterion for evaluating educational justice from the real freedom that people have to develop a valuable life. This implies that the success of an intervention should not be measured by numerical indicators or population coverage, but by the transformation of the conditions that limit the autonomy, participation and well-being of the subjects. Social education, then, becomes a tool to enhance capacities, strengthen ties and generate environments where people can recognize themselves as subjects of rights and knowledge. This perspective strongly challenges intervention models focused on control and surveillance, proposing instead a pedagogy of accompaniment, mutual care and empowerment.

Finally, the discussion suggests that the theoretical findings presented not only have academic value, but can guide concrete practices in the socio-educational field. Rethinking social justice from a critical perspective allows us to review the curricular frameworks, intervention strategies, evaluation devices and, above all, the ethical stance of the social educator in relation to the subjects with whom he or she works. In contexts where inequality is not only economic, but also symbolic and affective, the challenge is to build educational experiences that transform suffering into hope, exclusion into recognition, and dispossession into collective power.

Conclusions

Assuming social justice as the articulating axis of social education implies recognizing the deep ethical and political responsibility that falls on those who design, implement and accompany training processes in contexts marked by inequality. This responsibility cannot be reduced to the technical implementation of programmes or the functional management of vulnerable populations; on the contrary, it demands a critical understanding of the structural conditions that configure exclusion and a constant willingness to interrogate one's own practices

from the horizon of human dignity. Justice, understood from a relational and multidimensional perspective, requires overcoming the limits of a distributive logic focused on access to goods, to integrate dimensions such as recognition, participation, autonomy and the reconstruction of the social fabric.

In this sense, social education must be thought of as a situated praxis that articulates theoretical knowledge, lived experiences and daily resistances in the search for more equitable conditions for all subjects, especially for those historically silenced or marginalized. This praxis cannot be neutral or depoliticized, since it is inscribed in a network of power relations that cross territories, institutions, bodies and knowledge. For this reason, the social educator cannot act as a mere executor of public policies or as a manager of needs, but as an active agent in the construction of alternatives that aim at the transformation of the structures that sustain injustice. This transformation requires, in turn, a pedagogy that recovers the word, memory, desire and imagination as essential tools to dignify the educational experience.

The article allowed us to reflect on the contributions of different theoretical perspectives—such as the theory of capabilities, recognition justice, cognitive justice, and critical pedagogy—in the configuration of a robust conceptual framework to rethink social intervention practices from an emancipatory approach. These theories coincide in pointing out that justice cannot be imposed from above, nor designed in the abstract, but must be built from dialogue, reciprocity and mutual recognition. This implies a break with traditional forms of schooling that impose unique truths and delegitimize community knowledge, and a commitment to an education that listens, that recognizes subaltern narratives and that builds more democratic learning spaces.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that social education has an irreplaceable role in the task of reconstructing the collective sense of the public, the common and the just. At a time when individualistic, competitive and utilitarian logic predominates, social educators are called to defend life, speech and encounter as inalienable values. This requires courage to sustain counter-hegemonic practices, creativity to generate new forms of intervention and commitment to accompany processes that, although slow and complex, make hope possible. Social justice, in this framework, is not a destination that is reached, but a horizon that guides the educational journey with others and for others, from a pedagogy that dignifies, transforms and humanizes.

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