

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **Social justice perceptions of teacher candidates**

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**This study aims to determine the social justice perceptions of teacher candidates being trained in an education faculty. For this purpose, national and international literature was reviewed by the researcher and a 32-item questionnaire was developed and implemented on 237 senior year education faculty students. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed and social perception judgment was concluded to have a four dimensional structure; behaving in line with the principle of equality, social sensitivity, social responsibility and discrimination perception. It was found that teacher candidates had high social sensitivity, but relatively lower social responsibility levels and equality behaviors. The analyses showed that their social justice perceptions differed meaningfully with respect to gender and their major area of study.**

**Key words:** Social justice, social justice in education, social justice perceptions.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of studies related to school administrators' roles and responsibilities in order to achieve social justice at schools. Therefore, "social justice leadership" has been defined as a type of leadership and secured its place in the literature. In addition to school administrators' social justice leadership roles, another important factor for establishing social justice at schools is the social justice sensitivity of school employees at large and teachers in particular (Kose, 2009; Theoharis, 2007). There is today a growing approach that invites educators to learn and implement social justice. However, teaching social justice to future and practicing teachers is a job and teacher candidates view the teaching profession as not a communal but a solitary one. Thus, there is a need to develop a new professional community notion related to social justice (Calderwood, 2003; Marshall, 2004; Spalding et al., 2010). The development of this common language and notion should start at teacher training institutions.

Far from solely ensuring equality between individuals with diverse ethnic roots and economic conditions, the social justice approach at schools refers to justice for different elements of socioeconomic, sociocultural and linguistic diversity (Touchton and Acker-Hocevar, 2001).

There is a great number of such elements between people. Therefore, an all encompassing "inclusive" education should be the starting point (Alsbury and Shaw, 2005). For "inclusive" education, teachers need to be educated in the issue of social justice. As teacher training institutions comprise the first stage of teacher education, it is worthwhile to study the social justice perception and attitudes of teacher trainees. This study aims to identify the social justice perceptions of teacher candidates studying at an education faculty.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Human rights issues related with ethnic diversity, age, disability, gender, disease and lifestyle have made social justice more complex and hard to define. Justice is a guide that organizes how people will continue their lives as members of a society (Rebore, 2001: 227). It is one of the most important concerns of modern societies. When theorists and philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke, Marx and Rawls attempted to define social justice, they concerned themselves with the virtues of equality and freedom. Most authors define social justice as a socialist approach. The socialist perspective

radically assumes that humans are tied to each other. This is not only caused by our humanity but the global ties of our social, political and commercial institutions. The socialist perspective considers the balance between the principles of entitlement (what is it that we are entitled to?), need (what is it that we need?) and equality (what is it that is equal?). In this way, social justice becomes a subject to be considered not only in the output but also in processes and relationships (Miller, 1999; Speight and Vera, 2004).

There are views that define social justice only with the concepts of male-female or ethnic root. However, these views disregard an important part of elements of diversity between humans. In order to establish social justice, it is necessary to develop the right approach to analyzing the differences between people. On the other hand, factors that cause social injustice are not limited to these differences. The emphasis that social justice puts on collectivism rather than individualism also reveals the distinction between justice and social justice. Social justice treats justice from the aspect of social processes. Strike (1999) refers to the type of democracy that stresses individualism and uses individual rights to defend individual gains as a "weak democracy". Parallel to this, an understanding of justice that starts from the individual to analyze social relationships and power balance can be said to be incomplete. Covey (2005) states that notions such as justice and equality were not invented. At the root of equality and justice lie the principles of rights and rightfulness. Indeed, little children have an inherent feeling of rightfulness and justice, even when they have had experiences to condition them otherwise. Thus, even though rightfulness and justice may have different definitions and access paths, almost everyone is aware of these notions.

It is rather hard to define social justice as there is no set construct. Social justice is the expression of an ideal and a moral aim. Thus, it may be better understood if it is seen as a social process and an ethical way of life (Furman and Shields, 2003; Gale, 2000). In fact, the ideal of social justice exists in the legal texts of many countries. However, this ideal only becomes meaningful when it is reflected in social life. Many authors complain that the concept of social justice is devoid of its real meaning and is thus used to cover up inequalities. For instance, Pitt (1998) claims that as schools are an institution of the existing culture, they reflect its hegemonic practices. Ideologically, the social justice policy and practice at schools are formed in the hegemony of the educated. This situation presented as social justice is covered by a mask which makes us perceive it as natural and normal. It is in this way that social justice becomes colonized by the dominant social group. It becomes a symbol to justify dominant practices and thus strengthens their dominance. While the dominant meaning of social justice focuses on economic income, issues such as social solidarity and social

solidarity and strengthening the sense of community become sidelined.

### **Social justice in education**

Social justice in education is not only an issue of societies with ethnic diversity. In this century, changes in both economic and social areas have increased the elements of diversity between people. Starting from Sergiovanni's (1992) statement that "where there is a power imbalance, there is a need to talk about ethics", we may argue that social justice needs to be discussed in all environments where there is economic and social imbalance between people. The discussion of social justice is closely related to how it will be defined from the perspective of education. Therefore, there is a need to start from a definition of social justice from the aspect of education.

Social justice and democracy are two concepts that are misunderstood in education due to the following assumptions: 1. Schools serve economic benefits, 2. The success of schools is established by measurable student success, 3. Individuals are only motivated to learn by economic worries, 4. As teaching is a technical activity, teachers can only be held responsible for student success (Furman and Starratt, 2002). These assumptions emphasize the technical-rational side of education but ignore its ethical aspect. First of all, schools do not only serve economic benefits. The secondary aims of education, which is a social institution, have social connotations. Aims such as raising good citizens for the society, instilling in students a sense of democracy, and turning them into conscious producers and consumers should also be treated in the process of education. The success of schools cannot be measured solely by students' exam success. Such a belief ignores the character development aspect of education. Claiming that individuals only go to educational institutions with economic worries leads to the misconception that social justice is only needed in economic outcomes. On the other hand, teachers should be responsible not only for students' academic success but also for the development of their social skills. Social justice in education is not a technical subject. It can also be treated from the point of view of ethics. In addition to its rational dimension, social justice also has conscience and ethics dimensions. Its ethical dimension is in close relationship with concepts and issues such as social sensitivity, social responsibility, and resisting discrimination.

Bogotch (2002) states that it is not possible to make a one-fits-all definition of social justice which can endure many years. This is because the definition of social justice will not answer the needs of yesterday, today and tomorrow. The output of education cannot be predicted or controlled completely, thus requiring a constant review of the concept and understanding of social justice.

Therefore, the definition of social justice in education carries a situational and instantaneous quality. From the perspective of education, social justice may be defined as “an intentional intervention that requires the moral use of power” by considering situational characteristics. The idea of social justice in education goes one step beyond issues such as equal opportunity and right of education. These are important conditions that states need to provide. However, when equal opportunity and right of education is used by individuals, social justice problems need to be solved.

### **Purpose of study**

This study aims to identify the social justice perceptions of teacher candidates. In line with this broad aim, the following questions will be studied:

1. What are the main factors that shape teacher candidates' social justice perceptions?
2. At what level do teacher candidates display behaviors in line with social justice perceptions?
3. Is there a meaningful difference between teachers' gender and branches and the main factors that shape their social justice perceptions?

### **METHOD**

#### **Research design**

This study explores the social justice perceptions of teacher candidates. It is designed as a descriptive survey, which is a research approach that aims to describe an event or situation as it is. The event, individual or object under study is defined in its own circumstances (Karasar, 2007). This model may be used in studies which focus on what people think and what they do, or those which aim to identify different educational cases (Frankel and Wallen, 1993).

#### **Population and sample**

The population of the study was teacher candidates at Firat University Education Faculty. The sample comprised those in the last year of their studies. These students were selected thinking that they would have clearer views about both the teaching profession and social issues. A total of 375 questionnaires were distributed, and 237 were returned.

#### **Data collection tool**

The tool used in the study was designed based on the information obtained from the literature survey. The 32-item scale was implemented on the study sample, and the data obtained were analyzed by exploratory factor analysis. Items with low factor loadings and those that overlapped were removed from the scale. Five items were removed in this way and statistical analyses were performed on the remaining 27. The reliability coefficient of the final form of the scale was Alpha = 0.926 and its KMO value was 0.915. A five-point likert type scale was used in the study. The alternatives

were listed from positive to negative, with the values 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

### **Data analysis**

For data analysis purposes, the data obtained were entered into SPSS for Windows statistical package with a numbering system appropriate for the format of the scale. The data were analyzed with the same program by using exploratory factor analysis, frequencies, percentages, mean values and t-test techniques.

## **RESULTS**

The findings of the study and their interpretations are presented. These findings are presented based on the purposes of the study. Of the 237 teacher candidates who participated in this study, 128 were male (54%) and 109 were female (46%). In addition, 168 of these teacher candidates were majoring in social branches (70%) and 69 in science and mathematics branches (30%).

### **Factors shaping teacher candidates' social justice perceptions**

In order to determine the factors shaping teacher candidates' social justice perceptions, the explanatory factor analysis technique was used. As a result of factor analysis and varimax rotation, items with a factor loading below 0.50 and the overlapping ones were removed from the scale. According to the results of the exploratory factor analysis, teachers' social justice perceptions have a four-factor structure. Table 1 presents the factor loadings and dimensions of the items on the scale. Table 1 shows the results of the exploratory factor analysis which was conducted to reveal the factors that shape teacher candidates' social justice perceptions. As can be seen, the social justice perceptions of teacher candidates have a four-factor structure. These are behaving in accordance with the principle of equality, social sensitivity, social responsibility and discrimination perception. In order to adopt the principles of social justice and display behaviors in accordance with them, teacher candidates need to behave in line with these four elements.

### **Teacher candidates' levels of behaving in accordance with the principles of social justice**

Teacher candidates' levels of behaving in accordance with the principles of social justice are examined here. Table 2 presents the mean values showing teacher candidates' levels of behaving in accordance with the social justice factors determined in the study. Table 2 shows that the highest mean value belongs to social sensitivity, therefore suggesting that teacher candidates had a high social sensitivity level ( $\bar{X}=4,07$ ). At the same

**Table 1.** Factors shaping teachers' social justice perceptions.

Items	Factor loadings			
	Behaving in accordance with the principle of equality	Social sensitivity	Social responsibility	Discrimination perception
7. My classmates treat others in line with the principle of equality.	0.781			
8. My classmates treat persons of different faiths and sects equally.	0.771			
11. My classmates do not distinguish between people with different life perspectives.	0.769			
3. My classmates do not discrimination between people.	0.752			
4. My classmates cooperate with people from different cultural backgrounds.	0.731			
6. My classmates respect people talking different dialects.	0.725			
5. My classmates consider different perspectives.	0.717			
21. My classmates do not approach others with prejudice.	0.697			
9. My classmates do not distinguish between girls and boys.	681			
2. My classmates respect people from different cultural backgrounds.	0.669			
10. In our class, we treat successful and weak peers equally.	0.643			
12. My classmates believe that differences between people are a source of diversity and enrichment.	0.641			
13. In our class, everyone can express their ideas freely.	0.632			
15. In our class, people are not suppressed due to their ideas, beliefs and differences.	0.573			
1. My classmates are open to dialogue to establish good relations with others.	0.552			
30. I make an effort to improve my society.		0.855		
31. I feel the responsibility of being a member of this society.		0.854		
32. I feel responsible for the development of democracy in Turkey.		0.773		
29. I feel proud to be a citizen of this country.		0.702		
28. I am sensitive to the social problems of my country.		0.681		
27. I try to be in solidarity with the people around.		0.650		
26. My classmates are aware of their social responsibility as a member of this society.			0.752	
24. My classmates are sensitive to social problems.			0.723	
25. My classmates are willing to take part in activities to improve the society.			0.717	
14. My classmates have the social responsibility required by the teaching profession.			0.515	
16. In our class, people from families a high social status receive more acceptance.				0.868
18. My classmates care less for their peers who are not financially well off.				0.863

time, their perceptions regarding behaving in line with the principles of equality and social responsibility levels are close to each other ( $\bar{X}=3,28$ ,  $\bar{X}=3,23$ ). It is meaningful that teacher candidates had low perception levels about

behaving in line with the principles of equality and social responsibility. On the other hand, it is a positive finding that they have low discrimination perception.

Teacher candidates' social justice perceptions with respect to personal variables. In this section, teacher

**Table 2.** Mean values of teacher candidates' social justice behaviors.

Social justice factors	N	$\bar{X}$	S
Behaving in accordance with the principle of equality	237	3.28	0.83712
Social sensitivity	237	4.07	0.74262
Social responsibility	237	3.23	0.81879
Discrimination perception	237	2.25	1.03399

**Table 3.** Social justice perceptions of teacher candidates with respect to gender.

Social justice factors	Levene's test		Male		Female		t	p
	F	p	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S		
Behaving in accordance with the principle of equality	1.67	0.19	3.20	0.78	3.38	0.88	1.58	0.11
Social sensitivity	1.80	0.18	3.99	0.79	4.16	0.66	1.77	0.07
Social responsibility	0.56	0.45	3.23	0.80	3.22	0.84	0.03	0.97
Discrimination perception	0.05	0.81	2.38	1.06	2.11	1.05	2.03	0.04*

\*p&lt;.05.

**Table 4.** Social justice perceptions of teacher candidates with respect to branch.

Social justice factors	Levene's test		Social		Science		t	p
	F	p	$\bar{X}$	S	$\bar{X}$	S		
Behaving in accordance with the principle of equality	0.11	0.73	3.10	0.78	3.73	0.79	5.60	0.00*
Social sensitivity	1.47	0.22	4.00	0.75	4.25	0.66	2.45	0.01*
Social responsibility	2.46	0.11	3.07	0.81	3.61	0.68	4.81	0.00*
Discrimination perception	1.80	0.18	2.41	1.03	1.88	0.93	3.65	0.00*

\*p&lt;.05.

candidates' social justice perceptions were examined with respect to their gender branches.

Table 3 presents t-test results of male and female teacher candidates' social justice perceptions. The t-test results in Table 3 show that the views of male and female teacher candidates about behaving in line with the principles of equality, social sensitivity and social responsibility did not differ meaningfully. Thus, they had similar views about behaving in line with the principles of equality, social sensitivity and social responsibility. At the same time, a meaningful difference at the level 0.05 was found between male and female teacher candidates in the discrimination perception. Male teacher candidates seem to perceive more discrimination than females. As female teacher candidates were expected to be more sensitive about discrimination, this was a surprising finding. Table 4 offers the t-test results of teacher candidates' social justice perceptions with respect to the variable of branch. The table shows that a meaningful difference exists between science and social studies

teacher candidates in all dimensions of social justice. According to this, science teacher candidates had more positive perceptions of their own classes with respect to behaving in line with the principles of equality, social sensitivity and social responsibility. Also, social teacher candidates perceived more discrimination in their classes. It was a surprising finding that teacher candidates in the social branches viewed their classes as less adequate with respect to social justice as these teachers are generally expected to be more sensitive to social justice issues.

## DISCUSSION

This study revealed the factors that shape teacher candidates' social justice perceptions. The exploratory factor analysis showed that these factors were behaving in line with the principles of equality, social sensitivity, social responsibility and discrimination. Another finding

reached in the study was teacher candidates' levels of behaving in line with social justice. Looking at the mean values of previously specified factors, it can be seen that teacher candidates had a high level of social sensitivity. However, they had low levels of behaving in line with the principles of equality and social responsibility. On the other hand, it was a positive finding that teacher candidates perceived discrimination in their classes as being low. This implicates that social sensitivity is one of the most important issues regarding social justice. People who are not socially sensitive cannot accurately analyze and solve social justice problems. In a similar way, social sensitivity has an important place in increasing teacher candidates' competencies of providing social justice. It is not possible for a teacher without social sensitivity to feel social responsibility.

Another finding of this study has been that female teacher candidates had a lower level of discrimination perception than males. This is also surprising as women are usually thought to be disadvantaged regarding social discrimination and are thus expected to be more sensitive about it. However, the results of this study did not confirm this expectation. Males reported more discrimination in their classes, particularly regarding social status and income level. A meaningful difference was found in all dimensions of social justice between the perceptions of teacher candidates from science and social branches. Science teacher candidates had more positive perceptions of their classes regarding behaving in accordance with the principle of equality, social sensitivity and social responsibility. In addition, teacher candidates in the social branches perceived more discrimination in their classes. It was surprising that these teacher candidates viewed their classes as less adequate with respect to social justice because they are usually expected to be more sensitive to social justice issues. On the contrary, science teacher candidates were found to be more sensitive.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Training teachers in social justice is essential if social justice is to be achieved in educational institutions. Such training should start at teacher preparation institutions and be maintained through in-service training programs. The present study revealed the four main dimensions that need to be emphasized for teacher candidates to develop an accurate understanding of social justice. These are behaving in accordance with the principle of equality, social sensitivity, social responsibility and discrimination. Having teachers who behave in accordance with the principle of equality is the most important issue for achieving social justice at schools. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to adopt basic values such as the right of education and equality. Teacher preparation institutions should particularly emphasize this issue. Teachers need to be educated as socially sensitive and responsible individuals. In order to ensure this, teacher

preparation institutions should place importance on courses that increase social sensitivity. Together with social sensitivity, social responsibility is also crucial for social justice. It is of utmost importance that teachers are educated to feel the social sensitivity to identify social problems and to feel the social responsibility to take initiative to solve these problems. They should be educated to create socially fair schools through sensitivity education which considers the realities of the country and through extracurricular activities.

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