

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN RURAL EDUCATION

HERNÁN CUERVO



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Introduction

The concept of social justice is one of the central virtues and pillars of contemporary democracies. Nowhere are its consequences more keenly felt than in the education of each new generation of children and young people. The injustices and inequalities experienced by rural school participants, as this book will show, place the concept of social justice at the center of any discussion of education. The problem, however, is that social justice is a term that does not have the same meaning for everyone. It is usually understood as merit, need, fairness, equality, or equity, and it is in many instances used by philosophers, political theorists, sociologists, and educational researchers as self-evident and self-explanatory. One of the difficulties in conceptualizing social justice is that it is a contested term that carries often conflicting social, political, cultural, and economic meanings. Different political, economic, and social actors in society create a pluralistic agenda and each of these groups sustain their ideas and objectives through different rival conceptualizations of social justice, such as merit, need, or equality (MacIntyre 1985, 1988). These competing concepts of social justice and disparate positions do not arrive at a definitive concept of what social justice is. The same competing forces could be seen, for example, in the field of education, where different political and social groups have opposite visions of what “legitimate” knowledge or “good” teaching and learning consists of, rooted as they are in conflicting views of structural justice (e.g. gender, class, and race) in education and society (Apple 2001, p. 410). Yet paradoxically, there exists a rhetoric of consensus tied up with the implied universality of the concept—a

sense that we all understand what we are referring to when we speak of social justice—which masks these very real differences. What this rhetoric of consensus does is foreclose an ongoing discussion about how best to attend to these differences in constructing a just society.

While social justice is a contested term but usually invoked as an explicit concept, there is very little research that examines what socially just education means and looks like for rural school participants themselves.¹ This seems surprising given the different well-documented inequalities endured over time by rural schools (e.g. lack of breadth of curriculum, staffing shortages, deficient infrastructure, prohibitive cost of services, and students' educational performance) (Alloway et al. 2004; Boylan and Wallace 2007; Bradley 2008; Council for the Australian Federation 2007; Department of Education and Training [DET] 2007; Gonski 2011; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission [HREOC] 2000a; Welch et al. 2007). This picture of rural education is occurring as many rural communities across Australia, and around the world, have been experiencing important structural change and, in many cases, decline, in the last 20 years (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics [ABARE] 2008; Alston 2002; Brett 2011; Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics [BITRE] 2008; Carr and Kefalas 2009; Corbett 2007; Falk 2001; Kenway et al. 2006; Shucksmith 2012; Squires 2003; Woods 2011; Yang and Fetsch 2007). It is not my intention to present yet another deficit story about schooling in rural places, but given the opportunities and challenges occurring in rural education and communities, it is timely to ask people how socially just they feel teaching and learning is in rural places. In doing so, this book responds to the educational and political challenges of theorizing social justice education (Gewirtz 2002; North 2006), by bridging a gap between the theory and practice of normative social justice and social sciences (Brighouse 2004; Griffiths 1998b).

This book examines what social justice means to participants (students, teachers, principals, and parents) in two government (public) schools in rural Victoria, Australia. Including these voices in the discussion offers an important contribution to understanding what is going on in rural schools, which dimensions of social justice are being applied, and what the real needs are. This book contributes to an understanding of how an abstract concept, social justice, can work as an effective policy guide, in an operative way, by taking it from its theoretical isolation and putting it in the immediate context of rural schooling. Exploring the subjective element of social justice can make an important contribution to

understanding how social injustices are experienced, tolerated, and perpetuated in disadvantaged settings and can assist in outlining an agenda for change. It is in this vein that the different chapters of the book aim to answer important questions: What does social justice mean to rural school participants? Which dimension of social justice is dominant in rural school practices? What are the possibilities for enacting a more plural social justice in rural schools? And, how can socially unjust discourses and practices be interrupted in rural schools? Answers to these questions open up a path to examining what is happening in rural schools, and how we can address the needs of rural school participants and analyze the different dimensions of social justice that redress or reinforce inequality in rural schools. Without this understanding, policymakers, educators, and researchers alike risk continuing to adopt an insufficient or limited model of social justice, a one-size-fits-all approach to issues of social inequality.

My analysis of social justice draws upon the theoretical work of Iris Marion Young, a political theorist, feminist, and radical egalitarian, to reclaim the discourse of social justice from the liberal dominance of the principle of distributive justice. *Distributive justice*, simply put, focuses on how major social institutions assign rights and duties, and distributes benefits and burdens through social cooperation (Rawls 1972). Like Young, I search for a position that offers a plural model of social justice—one that overcomes the shortfalls of the liberal-egalitarian model that equates social justice mostly with distributive justice at the expense of other forms of redress. This is a much needed critical exercise in a field like rural education which is dominated by analyses of disadvantage in terms of funding and material resources. The emphasis on distributive issues might seem unsurprising given the problems with staffing, facilities, and breadth of curriculum that have perennially affected the quality of rural education. In modern Australian education policy, significant documents like the *Karmel Report* and the *Schools Disadvantage Commission* in the seventies up until the current *Gonski Review* have focused on a politics of distribution to redress the poor educational outcomes evident in rural education. By pluralizing social justice I am not denying the relevance of appropriate funding and distribution of material goods—they are a critical component in the delivery of a good quality of education. This was also the case for Young, who in her seminal book, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, already stated that distributive matters in society were critically important but not the end point of an analysis about justice. In rural schooling the adequate distribution of funding, facilities, and staffing is a perennial and

major concern. But it is at this point where I believe analyses of rural schooling should be problematized by opening up the discussion of social justice to other dimensions that heterogeneize inequality and disadvantage. Here is where the work of Young (1990, 1997a, b, 2000, 2001, 2006a, b) becomes very useful to analyze discourses and practices of justice based on the elimination of oppression and domination through the recognition and participation of all actors in the process of education and schooling rather than merely on the distribution of benefits and burdens by major social institutions. Hence, in addition to distributive justice, I argue for another two dimensions of social justice: recognitional and associational. *Recognitional justice*, simply put, attends to the redressing of cultural domination and disrespect experienced by marginal social groups or individuals (Young 1990). Recognitional justice, for example, in rural schooling refers to the promotion and celebration of diversity through the inclusion and legitimation of all social groups' culture and identity but also the respect and empowerment of teachers' work as critical actors in interrupting injustices. Recognition, empowerment, and autonomy are crucial but they are not complete without participation. Thus, a third dimension that we should care about if we are interested in interrupting and subverting social injustices and inequality is *associational justice*; that is defined by the degree of participation by individuals or groups in decisions which affect the conditions in which they live and act (Gewirtz 2006). It incorporates the notions of participation and of "voice," of being able to express own needs in one's own idiom (Young 1997a, 2006a) through processes of participative dialog. Associational justice in schooling makes the *process* of education as relevant as the *products* or outcomes. In rural schooling this dimension is vital in constructing spaces for teachers and principals' participation in policymaking structures and in making decisions about their everyday working practices in relation to the curriculum.

These dimensions of social justice need to be considered in temporal and spatial contexts because justice may very well have different meanings for different social groups in different historical moments. As Gewirtz (2006, p. 78) alerts us, social justice has to be understood within the "competing norms" and "external constraints" that shape discourses and practices in schools. What happens in schools must be understood in relation to dominant discourses, power relations, and normative socioeconomic constraints. In this book, the impact of neoliberal policies on education in the last two decades and the context of rurality are critical to understand current discourses of social justice. Thus, I examine how discourses and

practices of social justice in education have shifted from progressive politics to an economization of schooling underpinned by the need to skill-up the national workforce (Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Wyn 2009). This does not mean that social justice in education is completely abandoned, but it is reframed through neoliberal policy technologies based on monitoring and auditing of school processes and outcomes, which impact on the creation of new meanings of what counts as knowledge for students, and redefine what counts as an “effective” and “good” teacher. I paid also particular attention at the radical transformation of rural spaces, placing rurality as a central component of analysis rather than as a backdrop to a study on schooling. I take up the challenge of constructing “research *in* and *for* rural communities” to disrupt the metro-centric bias of educational studies that has condemned rural education to a residual space in research (Corbett and White 2014, p. 1, emphasis in original).² The concept of rurality is not simply put to use as research context but sees the way people make “rural sense of, and with their lives” (Howley et al. 2005, p. 2) as central to understanding how socially just schooling is for school participants and the community at large.

THE STUDY

The book draws on data from a research study conducted over a period of four years (2006–2010) that aimed to understand the meaning of social justice for rural school participants in two Victorian schools. I visited each school four times over a period of two years. In the first couple of visits I introduced my research ideas to potential school participants and had informal conversations about schooling and living in rural Victoria.³ The third and fourth visits entailed the collection of data, which involved focus group, semi-structured interviews, and gathering documents (e.g. school and community newsletters). The majority of people that participated in focus groups were later individually interviewed. Twenty-three members from Highland school (the pseudonym used for one of the communities and schools throughout) participated in focus groups (10 students, 8 teachers, and 5 parents), while 19 members from Lowland school (also a pseudonym) took part (8 students, 6 teachers, and 5 parents). In total I conducted 47 semi-structured interviews, including 2 interviews with each principal (In Highland, 12 students, 5 teachers, and 4 parents were interviewed, while in Lowland, 10 students, 8 teachers, and 4 parents). In general terms all participants were very supportive of the research.

Teachers were the group more inclined to be open about the sorrows and happiness of living and working in rural Victoria. Some parents who decided to participate were also eager to comment on their issues, mostly about their worries and problems. This idea of becoming an outlet to communicate their problems presented me with the delicate task of not hanging on to a “deficit” view of rural life and schooling.

The Communities

Both communities are approximately 400 kilometers away from Melbourne, the state’s capital, and approximately an hour and a half away from a small regional town. Highland is located in the northwest of Victoria, in the Mallee region, and Lowland is in the southeast, in East Gippsland area. According to the 2006 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2006), Highland has a population of 448 people (300 of them living in the town and the rest in farms) and Lowland has a population of 2,252 people. They both have a fairly monocultural population, although Lowland has a stronger presence of Indigenous people (6 % are Indigenous), and they have a fairly mature median population, around the mid-forties, in comparison with a younger national median population.

Both towns share a recent history of decline in their services that have affected their social and economic lives and resulted in a loss of population during the rationalization of public and private services during the 1990s (with Highland losing approximately 18 % and Lowland approximately 20 % of their total population) (McKenzie 2006). Highland residents experience a lack of many major services, such as banks, supermarkets, or clothing stores. The last owner of the supermarket could not find a buyer for it and left the town closing its doors. The main, and only, commercial street consists of one large block with an automotive mechanic shop, a café/milk-bar/takeaway food shop, the stationery shop (which carries the mail), an abandoned shop, and the pub/restaurant/motel (which includes an ATM machine in its facilities). There is only one government school and a small health post. Many of the community facilities are shared with the school (e.g. basketball court, swimming pool, library, football ground). Unlike Highland, Lowland has a variety of services beyond the school facilities, such as library, post office, police station, health center offering a range of health services, a fire brigade, the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria, supermarkets, banks, pubs, various cafés, and motels.

Agriculture is a key industry for both towns, more so in Highland where the sheep, beef cattle, and grain farming employs 41 % of people aged 15 years and over (ABS 2006). The Mallee region where Highland is located has been severely affected by the drought (at the time of the research study), putting great social and economic pressure on the community.⁴ Lowland's main commercial and industrial activities are agriculture, timber, retail trade, and tourism. During the 1990s the town suffered a major restructure of local government services and lost the shire epicenter to the nearby medium-size regional town (Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia [CRLRA] 2002). In addition to this, the traditional timber industry has experienced massive job cuts, and since then the town has tried to recreate itself as a tourist destination based on the pristine beaches a few kilometers away, the national parks, and the attraction of the famous Snowy River (CRLRA 2002; Dowling 2008).

In both communities there was a social group that was referred as "the minority" by participants. In Highland, this was the newly arrived members of the community escaping the housing price bubble: first migrating from Melbourne to regional centers and then to small towns like Highland. In Lowland, the minority group consisted of Indigenous people. Unfortunately, I was not able to interview any of the parents or students from these two minority groups.

The Schools

Both schools are the only secondary schooling option in their respective towns.⁵ Highland school is a government school that educates from pre-school to Year 12 (K-12) and in 2006 had a population of 147 students enrolled.⁶ The school is the hub of the community. Approximately 30 % of students received Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and very few of them come from homes where English is the second language. Highland's school enrolment has increased in the last years, mostly due to new families settling in the town and from students from nearby towns, reversing a trend of declining enrolments from 1993 to 2001. According to the principal, this is the result of the quality of education offered by the school. The school reports emphasize the "strong record of high academic achievement," which is attributed to a combination of "good teaching, small classes and a strong school-student-parent partnership." Nonetheless, challenges lie ahead with a "declining prep intake over the next few years."

While there are a couple of primary schools, government and non-government, in the town, Lowland school is the only secondary college with an enrolment of 352 students. Differently than in Highland school, there is a strong emphasis on their vocational education stream, through their “Community VCAL [Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning] course, which provides a pathway for previously ‘at risk’ students.”⁷ A school report points out to a “decline in enrolments, due to changing demographics” (losing 50 students in the last two years), which prompted the school to take an active role to design “specialized areas” to cater for a diverse population. This refers to a robust partnership between the local industry and the school focused on the senior years of schooling and the post-school pathways. This focus has been sustained with an investment in the school’s vocational facilities, including a *Skills Centre* (a collaboration between state government and local industry).

CHAPTERS OUTLINE

The next three chapters provide the rural and educational context and the normative framework of justice that informs this book. In these chapters I draw and reflect on my interdisciplinary research interests: from education research and rural studies to sociology of youth and political theory, to depict the profound changes in education, rural spaces and youth lives and to offer an analysis of what a normative plural social justice can look like. Chapter 2 is divided into two parts. In the first part I problematize the idea of rurality through an analysis of the economic, political, and social changes that occurred in rural Australia in the last decades. Examining these changes is critical if we want to understand the dynamic social context of rural communities that affect the processes and outcomes of education, and the post-school opportunities for students. The analysis of rural change is based on the multifunctional rural transition framework, with its landscapes of production, amenity and conservation, and on the impact of “roll-back” and “roll-out” neoliberal policies in the creation of new rural spaces and subjectivities based on resilience and individual (regional) responsibility. The second part of the chapter looks at the centrality of rural education in educational research and a historical analysis of the place of rural education in policy. A central claim throughout this chapter is the increasingly peripheral position of rural education and rural affairs in the educational and social and economic imagination of the nation. In Chap. 3, I continue my examination of the state of rural education placing the

focus on what happens in rural schools. I do it firstly by mapping the broad changes in Australian education policy in the last few decades: from a progressive politics in the 1970s to the hegemonic dominance of the neoliberal project. This project not only has redefined the idea of social justice, through the marriage of efficiency and productivity with equity, but also transformed what it means to teach and learn in schools. In particular, teachers' work has been affected by neoliberal policy technologies of performativity, accountability, and marketization, generating boundaries of what is possible in the classroom and at school. Needless to say, this does not mean teachers are not able to transcend these boundaries but it does mean that the task has become harder. These challenges are complicated by the difficulties of recruiting and retaining teachers in rural schools, which has significant implications on the delivery of good quality education. Finally, drawing on research about the sociology of youth and mobility, the chapter analyzes the discourses that underpin the current normative idea of youth transitions associated with continuing with education well into their twenties, which for many young people in rural places means leaving their communities.

Chapter 4 provides the core theoretical work of this book. Here I explore what a plural idea of social justice might look like. I begin by explaining why universal, neutral and impartial conceptualizations of social justice are not useful to understand socially just situations, experiences or even policies to move on to three critical dimensions that pluralize the term. As mentioned earlier, I draw on the work of Iris Marion Young to overcome the shortfalls of liberal-egalitarian frameworks that presume that social justice outcomes will be attained through the proper and just distribution of material goods. I believe that focusing on the distribution of resources on schooling is just one critical dimension to attain socially just education but that rural people need and deserve other forms of justice, cultural and political, to overcome inequality and injustice. Hence, I move the argument forward toward issues of recognition and associational justice through the work of Young to encompass the different problems and solutions needed by rural schools.

The next three chapters are structured in time and space. The chapters are purposefully quite descriptive by bringing in the voices of school participants to highlight the heterogeneity of social justice claims and the economic, political, social, and environmental complexities that surrounds schooling in rural places. By temporally and spatially locating their experiences in the past, present and future, and school and post-school

pathways, I argue we can achieve a richer understanding of the context of participants' responses. I view time and space not as merely neutral objects but processes shaped by social structures and social relationships. Each social time and space is a singular process, albeit interdependent of others, which offer multiple meanings, they are socially produced and interpreted; they are a product of social relationships and take part in the construction of social relationships (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Soja 2010).

So, in Chap. 5, I examine how rural school participants understand social justice in relation to their experiences in the present institutionalized time and space of rural schooling. The meanings that participants give to social justice contribute to understanding what is going on in rural schools—the challenges and opportunities they face. In Chap. 6, I examine the post-school educational and employment options for rural young people, where a metamorphosis of social justice views is produced from the “certainty” of rural community life to the unpredictability of a future away from their local space due to the lack of opportunities. Participants' comments, however, offer a tension between the needs of youth to migrate and the sustainability of the town, and what is more challenging, a lack of recognition that some young people in both places cannot mobilize the needed resources to migrate and that in them lies the hope of the community. In Chap. 7, I highlight teachers' discourses and interventions that contribute to a more plural conceptualization of social justice and to resist, challenge and reshape the pressures and constraints of neoliberalism. I use the concept of hope as a heuristic tool to develop a narrative of change and inclusion for all members of the community and highlight different practices that show that a plural social justice is attainable. Five years after this study was carried out some of the challenges faced by rural schools and its participants continue. In the last chapter I examine these challenges and reflect on possible avenues of socially just change.

This book argues that social justice matters in the endeavor to address the disadvantages faced in rural schools. But discussion about social justice in rural education has been historically based on a narrow liberal consensus that sees leveling the playing field between urban and rural schools through more funding and material resources as the answer. In order to make it relevant in concrete ways and affect real social justice outcomes, this book presents what we can learn when we examine what social justice would look like for participants themselves and reveal it in all its rural complexity.

NOTES

1. A plethora of empirical studies have looked into beliefs and meanings about the idea of social justice. These studies were developed in a wide-range of disciplines: political science, philosophy, public policy, social psychology, sociology, law, political economy, and political psychology, among others. For instance, several studies were concerned with income distribution and welfare matters, such as housing and health (e.g. Headey 1991; Hochschild 1981; Mitchell et al. 2003; Sefton 2005); others focused on the principles of equity and equality as allocation norms (e.g. Kahn et al. 1982; Törnblom and Jonsson 1987); some studies were concerned with justice in the workplace (Dubet 2009), and still others on the sense of (in) justice in the distribution of resources and grades in schools (Jasso and Resh 2002; Sabbagh et al. 2006). They, however, were based on liberal theories, mostly informed by distributive justice, focusing on the principles of equality, desert, and need.
2. A decade ago Arnold et al. (2005) already complained about the paucity of rural themes in the education literature, and only just recently Howley and Howley (2014) stressed the difficulties of rural education manuscripts to attract the attention of publishing houses and journals.
3. As an “outsider” to the environment of Australian rural schools, I had to rely on expert advice to meet potential research participants. During an annual meeting of the Victorian organization Country Education Project I was invited by a senior officer of the organization to visit several rural schools. From this trip I made a pre-selection of four schools as possible research sites. This trip to several schools and another that I undertook to a one-teacher school had a profound impact on me. I was impressed with the quality and quantity of the staff and infrastructure of the schools, which did not resemble the many impoverished rural schools I worked with in my native country Argentina (see Cuervo 2006). Principals of the four schools were contacted seeking interest and support in this project. While all principals show interest in it, I selected two research sites that reflected the variety of rural communities and schools, which have been shown to indicate differences in the experiences of rural people (Alloway et al. 2004; Kenyon et al. 2001).
4. A quarter of Highland residents are employed within the government sector—school and health post- while the sectors “other food product manufacturing” and “cafes, restaurants and takeaway food services.” represent the other employment sector. Highland’s unemployment rate in 2006 was below the national rate at 4.6 %, where a high proportion of the population is occupied as managers (mostly due to the high proportion of small independent businesses). The local median individual income, rent per week

- and housing loan repayment was approximately two-thirds below the national figures (ABS 2006).
5. Both schools included students from families of poor socio-economic background, small business people, farmers struggling with the drought, Indigenous families and parents from professional background.
 6. The school newsletter publishes and promotes news and events related to the school and to the community as well. It is common to find stories related to the drought and community events, including extra-curricular activities that involve the whole community. Interestingly, there are several stories that celebrate the anniversary of the establishment of family-owned farms with the hope that they remain in the “family name for many more years to come”. According to the annual school report, the predominant parental occupation is farming (grain growing).
 7. A school report also claimed there was an improvement in student connectedness with key staff receiving training in “Restorative Practices” and in “Understanding Poverty”.

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