

Social Justice in Education Beyond Access: A Conceptual Sociological Framework

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ABSTRACT

Education is widely regarded as a key instrument for promoting social justice; however, expanded access alone has proven insufficient to address persistent educational inequalities. Sociological research suggests that deep-rooted structural, cultural, and institutional factors continue to shape unequal educational experiences and outcomes. This conceptual article aims to examine social justice in education beyond mere access and to identify the key sociological dimensions necessary for developing a comprehensive framework of educational justice. Adopting a conceptual and theoretical methodology, the study draws on major sociological and social justice theories to analyse education as a socially embedded institution influenced by power relations, stratification, and cultural norms. Through critical synthesis, the article identifies structural inequality, equitable distribution of resources, cultural recognition, pedagogical justice, participation, institutional governance, and capability development as interrelated dimensions of social justice in education. The proposed sociological framework conceptualises social justice as a dynamic and multidimensional process rather than a policy outcome. The study concludes that achieving substantive social justice in education requires systemic transformation that integrates structural reform, inclusive pedagogy, democratic participation, and expanded learner capabilities. The framework offers theoretical guidance for future research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: Social Justice in Education, Educational Sociology, Structural Inequality, Equity, Inclusion

Education has long been regarded as a powerful instrument for promoting social justice and social mobility in modern societies. Expansion of educational access, particularly at the school and higher education levels, has been a central focus of educational policies across the world. Increased enrolment, universal schooling initiatives, and inclusive education policies are often presented as indicators of progress toward educational justice. However, sociological research consistently demonstrates that mere access to education does not automatically ensure social justice, as deep-rooted inequalities continue to shape educational experiences and outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986; Apple, 2013). From a sociological perspective, education functions not only as a site of learning but also as a social institution embedded within broader structures of power, class, culture, and inequality. Scholars have argued that educational systems frequently reproduce existing social hierarchies through

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curriculum practices, assessment mechanisms, language policies, and institutional norms, even when access appears formally equal (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). As a result, students from marginalised social groups often experience exclusion, misrecognition, and limited participation within educational spaces, despite being physically present in schools and universities.

Contemporary discussions on social justice in education therefore emphasise the need to move beyond access-oriented approaches toward a more comprehensive understanding that includes equity, recognition, participation, and meaningful outcomes. Theories of social justice proposed by Rawls (1971), Sen (2009), and Fraser (2008) highlight that justice cannot be achieved solely through equal distribution of resources but must also address structural inequalities, cultural domination, and unequal power relations. In the context of education, this implies examining how social categories such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and language intersect to shape learners' opportunities and experiences.

Educational sociology offers a critical lens to analyse these complexities by situating schooling within its social, economic, and political contexts. It enables an exploration of how institutional practices, pedagogical relationships, and policy frameworks contribute either to social reproduction or to social transformation. Despite growing attention to inclusive education and equity-based reforms, there remains a lack of integrated conceptual sociological frameworks that systematically explain social justice in education beyond the narrow focus on access.

In this context, the present conceptual article seeks to address this gap by re-examining social justice in education through a sociological perspective. Guided by the research questions-*how social justice in education can be conceptualised beyond mere access and which sociological dimensions are essential for developing a comprehensive framework*-the study aims to critically analyse existing understandings and propose a multidimensional sociological framework. Such a framework is essential for informing future educational policies, practices, and research that aspire to achieve substantive, rather than symbolic, social justice in education.

Research Questions

- i) How can social justice in education be conceptualised beyond mere access through a sociological perspective?
- ii) What key sociological dimensions are essential for developing a comprehensive framework of social justice in education?

Objectives of the Study

- i) To conceptually examine social justice in education beyond the notion of mere access from a sociological perspective.
- ii) To identify and analyse the key sociological dimensions necessary for constructing a comprehensive framework of social justice in education.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a conceptual and theoretical research design grounded in the discipline of educational sociology. Rather than employing empirical data collection methods, the study relies on systematic conceptual analysis and sociological interpretation to examine the meaning and scope of social justice in education beyond mere access. This

approach is appropriate given the study's aim to develop a theoretical framework that integrates multiple sociological dimensions of educational justice.

The analysis is based on a critical review and synthesis of classical and contemporary sociological theories related to education, inequality, social justice, and power. Foundational works by scholars such as Bourdieu, Bowles and Gintis, Rawls, Fraser, Sen, Apple, and Giroux were conceptually examined to identify recurring sociological themes, assumptions, and gaps. Key concepts—such as structural inequality, cultural recognition, equity, pedagogy, participation, governance, and capabilities—were analytically compared and integrated.

Framework Development

Through an interpretative and integrative process, these sociological dimensions were organised into a multidimensional conceptual framework illustrating their interrelationships. The framework was developed to explain social justice in education as a dynamic and interconnected process shaped by structural, institutional, cultural, and pedagogical forces. This methodological approach allows for theoretical clarity and provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy analysis.

A Sociological Framework for Social Justice in Education

The conceptual framework illustrates social justice in education as a dynamic and interconnected sociological process, rather than a linear or access-driven outcome. At the centre of the framework lies *social justice in education*, which is shaped by the continuous interaction among structural inequality and stratification, cultural recognition and inclusion, equitable resources and opportunities, and pedagogical justice and participation. From a sociological standpoint, education is embedded within wider systems of social stratification based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and disability. These structural inequalities determine who benefits from education and how educational opportunities are distributed (Bourdieu, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Even when formal access is ensured, unequal social positioning influences learners' academic experiences, expectations, and outcomes. Consequently, social justice must be conceptualised as addressing systemic disadvantage, not merely physical inclusion within educational institutions.

The framework further highlights cultural recognition and inclusion as a core dimension of justice. Sociological theories emphasise that injustice operates not only through economic deprivation but also through cultural marginalisation and symbolic exclusion (Fraser, 2008). Curricula, pedagogical content, and institutional norms often privilege dominant social groups, leading to the invisibilisation of marginalised identities and knowledge systems. Cultural recognition within education is therefore essential for epistemic justice, ensuring that learners' languages, histories, and lived experiences are acknowledged and respected. Closely linked to this dimension is pedagogical justice and participation, which focuses on classroom-level power relations. Teaching methods, assessment practices, and teacher expectations frequently reproduce inequality through standardisation and deficit perspectives (Apple, 2013). Justice-oriented pedagogy requires inclusive, dialogic, and participatory practices that enable learners to exercise agency and voice within the learning process.

Equitable access to resources and opportunities constitutes another critical pillar of the framework. Sociological perspectives argue that educational justice depends on fair distribution of material and symbolic resources, including qualified teachers, infrastructure, learning materials, and technological access (Rawls, 1971). However, equity differs from equality in that it recognises socially produced disadvantages and seeks to compensate for

them. This dimension connects directly with the broader outcomes of education, particularly learners' capabilities and social mobility. Drawing on Sen's (2009) capability approach, the framework underscores that justice must be evaluated through learners' real freedoms and long-term opportunities, rather than narrow achievement indicators. Education becomes socially just when it expands individuals' capacities for meaningful participation in social, economic, and civic life.

Surrounding these core elements, the framework situates education within institutional power and governance structures that shape policy priorities, accountability mechanisms, and normative expectations. Neoliberal governance, market-oriented reforms, and standardisation often prioritise efficiency over equity, thereby constraining justice-oriented educational practices (Apple, 2013). At the same time, student voice and agency emerge as transformative forces within the framework, highlighting the importance of democratic engagement and participatory school cultures (Giroux, 2011). The interconnected arrows in the framework symbolise that none of these dimensions operate in isolation; rather, social justice in education is produced through the constant interaction between structures, institutions, pedagogies, and outcomes, all mediated by intersecting social categories. This sociological conceptualisation reframes social justice as an ongoing, relational, and context-sensitive process that requires systemic transformation rather than fragmented reforms.

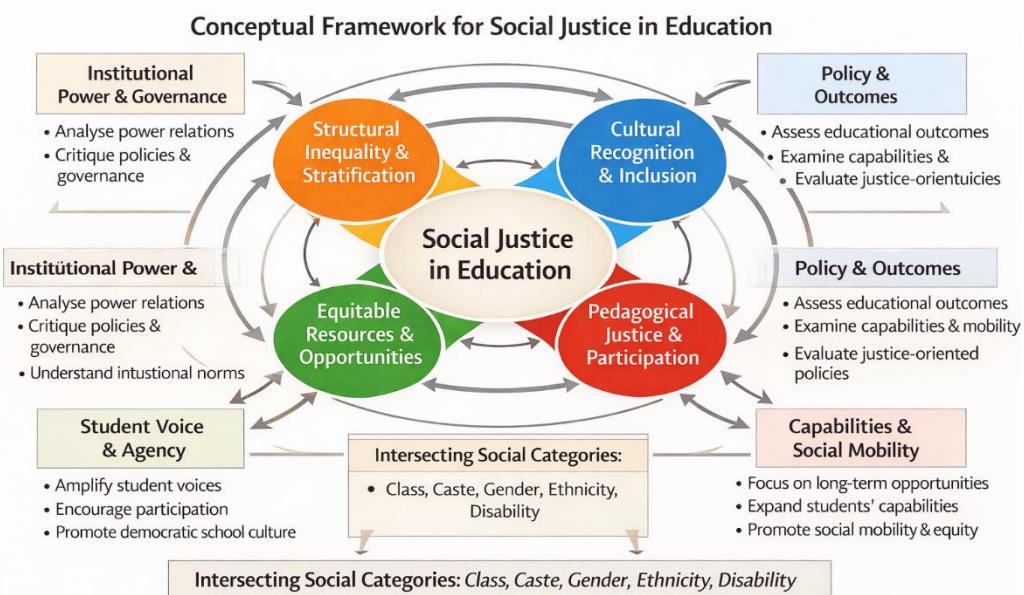


Fig:1 Conceptual Framework for social justice in education

DISCUSSION

Research Questions 1: How can social justice in education be conceptualised beyond mere access through a sociological perspective?

The discussion addresses how social justice in education can be understood beyond the limited notion of access, using a sociological perspective, as guided by the stated research question and objective.

1. Limitations of Access-Oriented Approaches to Social Justice

Educational policies have traditionally equated social justice with equal access to schooling, measured through enrolment rates, infrastructure expansion, and compulsory education initiatives. While access is a necessary condition, sociological scholarship highlights that it is insufficient to ensure justice (Apple, 2013). Students may enter educational institutions, yet

continue to face exclusion through curriculum bias, unequal treatment, and limited opportunities for success. Thus, access alone often produces formal equality without substantive justice (Rawls, 1971).

2. Education as a Site of Social Inequality

From a sociological perspective, education operates within broader social structures of class, caste, gender, and power. Bourdieu (1986) argues that educational institutions privilege dominant cultural capital, thereby disadvantaging learners from marginalised backgrounds. Even when access is equal, differences in social background influence language use, academic expectations, and teacher perceptions, resulting in unequal educational experiences and outcomes. Social justice, therefore, must account for these structural inequalities embedded within schooling.

3. Beyond Access: The Role of Equity in Education

Conceptualising social justice beyond access requires a shift from equality to equity. Equity recognises that learners start from unequal social positions and therefore require differentiated support to achieve meaningful educational outcomes (Sen, 2009). Sociologically, this involves addressing unequal resource distribution, learning conditions, and institutional support systems. Justice in education thus depends not on treating all students the same, but on responding to their socially produced disadvantages.

4. Cultural Recognition and Curriculum Justice

Social justice in education also involves cultural recognition, not merely physical inclusion. Fraser (2008) emphasises that injustice arises when certain identities and knowledge systems are marginalised. In educational contexts, curricula often reflect dominant cultural narratives, ignoring the histories, languages, and experiences of marginalised communities. Conceptualising justice beyond access requires rethinking curriculum content to ensure symbolic inclusion and epistemic justice.

5. Pedagogical Relationships and Classroom Power

Sociological analysis highlights the importance of pedagogical practices in shaping educational justice. Teaching methods, assessment systems, and classroom interactions often reproduce power hierarchies through rigid evaluation standards and deficit-based views of learners (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Social justice beyond access demands pedagogical approaches that are inclusive, dialogic, and responsive to diverse learners' social realities. Thus, justice is enacted not only through policy but through everyday classroom practices.

6. Participation and Student Agency

Another critical dimension of social justice beyond access is participatory justice. Mere presence in educational institutions does not guarantee that students have a voice in decision-making processes. Sociological perspectives stress the importance of student agency, democratic engagement, and community participation in shaping educational experiences (Apple, 2013). Justice-oriented education enables learners to actively participate rather than remain passive recipients of instruction.

7. Education, Power, and Social Transformation

Education can function either as a mechanism of social reproduction or as a tool for social transformation. When justice is defined narrowly in terms of access, education tends to reinforce existing inequalities. However, when justice is conceptualised sociologically—addressing structure, culture, pedagogy, and participation—education gains the potential to

challenge social hierarchies (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Thus, social justice beyond access requires a critical reorientation of educational systems.

Research Questions 2: What key sociological dimensions are essential for developing a comprehensive framework of social justice in education?

Addressing social justice in education requires moving beyond fragmented or policy-driven interpretations toward a comprehensive sociological framework. In response to the research question-*what key sociological dimensions are essential for developing such a framework*-this discussion identifies and analyses the major dimensions that collectively shape justice within educational systems.

1. Structural Inequality and Social Stratification

One of the most fundamental sociological dimensions of social justice in education is structural inequality. Education systems are embedded within broader structures of social stratification based on class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and disability. Sociological theorists argue that these structures systematically influence access to resources, quality of schooling, and educational outcomes (Bourdieu, 1986; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). A comprehensive framework of social justice must therefore address how institutional arrangements and policy mechanisms reproduce or challenge these inequalities.

2. Distribution of Resources and Opportunities

Social justice in education is closely linked to the unequal distribution of educational resources, including infrastructure, qualified teachers, learning materials, and technological access. Rawls' (1971) principle of fairness highlights that justice requires arrangements that benefit the least advantaged. From a sociological standpoint, resource distribution reflects power relations and policy priorities, making it a critical dimension in evaluating whether education systems promote equitable opportunities or reinforce social hierarchies.

3. Cultural Recognition and Symbolic Inclusion

Beyond material resources, social justice involves cultural recognition. Fraser (2008) emphasises that injustice occurs when certain social groups are culturally marginalised or misrepresented. In education, curricula and pedagogical content often privilege dominant cultural narratives, sidelining the histories, languages, and knowledge systems of marginalised communities. A sociological framework of justice must therefore incorporate symbolic inclusion and epistemic justice, ensuring that diverse identities are valued within educational spaces.

4. Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Power Relations

Pedagogy represents a crucial micro-level dimension of social justice. Sociological analyses highlight that teaching methods, assessment systems, and teacher expectations can either mitigate or exacerbate inequality (Apple, 2013). Traditional, standardised pedagogies often disadvantage learners from non-dominant backgrounds. A comprehensive framework must thus include pedagogical justice, focusing on inclusive teaching, fair assessment, and critical engagement with learners' social realities.

5. Participation, Voice, and Democratic Engagement

Social justice in education extends to the extent of participatory inclusion afforded to students, parents, and communities. Mere enrolment does not ensure that learners have a meaningful voice in educational decision-making. Sociological perspectives stress the importance of agency, dialogue, and democratic school cultures in achieving justice (Giroux,

2011). Participation is therefore a key dimension that transforms students from passive recipients into active contributors to their educational experiences.

6. Institutional Power and Governance

Educational institutions operate within systems of governance shaped by political, economic, and ideological forces. Neoliberal policies, standardisation, and market-driven reforms often prioritise efficiency over equity, influencing who benefits from education (Apple, 2013). A sociological framework of social justice must critically analyse institutional power, policy discourse, and governance structures to understand how justice is enabled or constrained at systemic levels.

7. Outcomes, Capabilities, and Social Mobility

Justice in education cannot be evaluated solely by access or processes; it must also consider educational outcomes and life chances. Sen's (2009) capability approach emphasises the importance of expanding individuals' real freedoms and opportunities. Sociologically, this involves examining whether education enhances learners' capabilities for social participation, employment, and civic engagement. Thus, outcome-oriented justice is a vital dimension of a comprehensive framework.

8. Interconnectedness of Sociological Dimensions

These sociological dimensions-structural inequality, resource distribution, cultural recognition, pedagogy, participation, governance, and outcomes-are interrelated rather than isolated. A comprehensive framework of social justice in education must therefore adopt a multidimensional approach that recognises how macro-level structures and micro-level practices interact to shape educational experiences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

CONCLUSION

This conceptual study demonstrates that social justice in education cannot be adequately understood through an access-based lens alone. While access remains a necessary condition, a sociological perspective reveals that educational injustice persists through structural inequalities, cultural marginalisation, unequal resource distribution, and exclusionary pedagogical practices. The analysis highlights that justice in education is a process-oriented and relational phenomenon, shaped by the interaction between social stratification, institutional power, curriculum practices, and learner participation.

By identifying key sociological dimensions-structural inequality, equitable resources, cultural recognition, pedagogical justice, participation, governance, and capabilities-the study proposes a comprehensive framework that moves beyond fragmented or policy-driven interpretations of social justice. The framework underscores the importance of recognising intersecting social categories such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and disability in shaping educational experiences and outcomes.

The study contributes to educational sociology by offering a theoretically integrated framework that can inform future research, policy formulation, and educational practice. Achieving substantive social justice in education requires systemic transformation that addresses not only who enters educational institutions, but also how education is organised, experienced, and translated into meaningful life opportunities.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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