



Education for Social Justice, Equality, Inclusivity and Global Citizenship

A Historical Perspective

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Abstract : This article traces the historical development of education for social justice, equality, inclusivity, and global citizenship from the postwar codification of education as a human right through anti-caste and anti-colonial educational movements to the contemporary global citizenship education agenda. Drawing on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, B. R. Ambedkar's anti-caste critique of educational exclusion, Gandhi's scheme of Basic Education, Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and James Banks's and Martha Nussbaum's contributions to citizenship and cosmopolitan education, the article argues that contemporary global citizenship education is best understood as the most recent articulation of a much longer and layered historical struggle over the social purpose of education, rather than as a distinctly new preoccupation. The article concludes that recognizing this historical genealogy clarifies both the continuities and the genuinely new challenges facing contemporary educational policy in this domain.

IndexTerms - education for social justice; inclusive education; global citizenship education; Ambedkar; Nai Talim; Paulo Freire; history of education

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea that education should serve the goals of social justice, equality, and inclusion is often discussed as though it were a distinctly contemporary preoccupation, associated with late-twentieth-century movements for civil rights, multiculturalism, and global citizenship education. This article argues that these contemporary movements are better understood as the most recent expressions of a much longer historical struggle over the social purpose of education - a struggle in which education has been claimed, at different moments, as an instrument of exclusion and hierarchy and, at other moments, as an instrument of emancipation and belonging. Tracing this history from foundational rights instruments through anti-caste and anti-colonial educational movements to the contemporary global citizenship education agenda clarifies both what is genuinely new in the present moment and what continuities connect it to a much longer history of educational struggle.

2. EDUCATION AS A UNIVERSAL RIGHT: THE POSTWAR SETTLEMENT

A significant historical marker in the codification of education as an instrument of social justice is Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which established not only a right to education but a substantive vision of what that education should accomplish, stating that education shall be

directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that it shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups ¹. This formulation is historically significant because it framed education not merely as a mechanism for individual advancement or economic development but as an instrument with an explicitly social and international purpose - the promotion of tolerance and inter-group understanding - anticipating by several decades the vocabulary of inclusion and global citizenship that would become prominent in later educational discourse.

3. EDUCATION AGAINST CASTE: AMBEDKAR'S HISTORICAL INTERVENTION

Within the Indian context specifically, the historical struggle to make education an instrument of social justice was shaped decisively by B. R. Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a structure that education, far from automatically dismantling, had historically helped to entrench through the unequal distribution of access to learning. In his 1936 address *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that the caste system could not be reformed piecemeal because it was sustained by a religiously sanctioned social and educational order, and that genuine social transformation required both the extension of education to those historically excluded from it and a more fundamental confrontation with the ideological structures that had justified that exclusion ². Ambedkar's subsequent role as the principal architect of India's constitutional framework translated this historical critique into a set of legal commitments to equality and non-discrimination that continue to shape the constitutional foundation of Indian education policy, including provisions for affirmative access to educational institutions for historically disadvantaged communities.

Ambedkar's intervention is historically significant for a further reason: it insisted that education for social justice could not be adequately addressed through appeals to individual charity or piecemeal reform, but required structural change in who controlled and had access to educational institutions. This structural framing anticipated, within a specifically Indian historical context, arguments that would later be developed in other geographical and political settings regarding the relationship between education and the reproduction, or disruption, of social hierarchy.

4. GANDHI'S NAI TALIM AND THE CRITIQUE OF HIERARCHICAL SCHOOLING

A parallel, though philosophically distinct, historical intervention emerged from Gandhi's scheme of Basic Education, or Nai Talim, formulated at the Wardha Conference of 1937. Gandhi's scheme was directed against what he regarded as the socially divisive character of colonial schooling, which had reproduced class distinctions between manual and intellectual labour by confining productive craft work to those without access to formal schooling, and he proposed instead an education in which every child, regardless of social background, would engage in productive craft work as the foundation of the curriculum, on the premise that dignifying manual labour within the school itself would erode, rather than reinforce,

¹United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN General Assembly Resolution 217 A (Paris: United Nations, 1948), art. 26.

²B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*, ed. S. Anand (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014 [1936]).

existing social hierarchies ³. While Nai Talim and Ambedkar's anti-caste critique differed substantially in their diagnosis of Indian social hierarchy and in the political strategies each proposed, both located the reform of education, rather than education's mere expansion, as the necessary condition for a more equal society, establishing a historical precedent within Indian educational thought for treating equality and inclusion as questions of curricular and institutional design rather than access alone.

5. FREIRE AND THE GLOBAL TURN TOWARD CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The mid-twentieth-century history of education for social justice acquired a distinct and internationally influential articulation in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, developed from his work in adult literacy programmes with Brazilian peasant labourers. Freire argued that conventional education functioned as a banking model in which knowledge was deposited by teachers into passive students, a model that reproduced existing relations of domination by discouraging critical reflection on the social and political conditions of the learner's own life; against this, he proposed a problem-posing pedagogy in which teacher and student jointly investigated the learner's social reality as the foundation for both literacy and political consciousness ⁴. Freire's framework proved historically consequential well beyond Latin America, providing a theoretical vocabulary - critical consciousness, the banking model, dialogic education - that was subsequently taken up across a wide range of national contexts concerned with using education to address entrenched social inequality, and that continues to inform contemporary approaches to inclusive and socially engaged pedagogy.

6. FROM NATIONAL INCLUSION TO GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

The final phase of this historical trajectory concerns the extension of education for equality and inclusion beyond the boundaries of the nation-state toward an explicitly global framing. James Banks's influential analysis of citizenship education in an era of large-scale international migration argues that the liberal assimilationist model of citizenship education, which historically asked minority and immigrant students to set aside their home cultures and languages in favour of a single national identity, has become inadequate to societies that are, in practice, ethnically, linguistically, and religiously diverse, and he calls instead for a citizenship education that helps students develop what he terms reflective cultural, national, and global identifications simultaneously ⁵. This concern with balancing national belonging against broader human commitments echoes an older debate in political philosophy over the relationship between patriotism and cosmopolitanism, in which Martha Nussbaum has argued that education should cultivate primary allegiance to the worldwide community of human beings rather than to any more local or national grouping alone ⁶.

³Mahatma Gandhi, *Basic Education* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1951).

⁴Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

⁵James A. Banks, "Diversity, Group Identity, and Citizenship Education in a Global Age," *Educational Researcher* 37, no. 3 (2008): 129-139.

⁶Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," in *For Love of Country*, ed. Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 2-17.

This historical trajectory reached a significant point of international institutional consolidation with the adoption of the 2015 Incheon Declaration, in which UNESCO member states committed to a vision of education explicitly encompassing sustainable development, human rights, gender equality, and global citizenship as integral rather than peripheral educational goals, formally embedding within the international Sustainable Development Goals framework a conception of education's purpose that traces its lineage through the postwar human rights settlement, national struggles against caste and colonial hierarchy, and the mid-century turn toward critical, dialogic pedagogy ⁷.

7. CONCLUSION

The history of education for social justice, equality, inclusivity, and global citizenship is best understood not as a single, linear narrative of progressive enlightenment but as the accumulation of distinct historical struggles - the postwar codification of education as a human right, Ambedkar's structural critique of caste and educational exclusion, Gandhi's critique of the social hierarchy embedded in colonial schooling, Freire's critical pedagogy of the oppressed, and the contemporary movement toward global citizenship education - each responding to a specific historical condition of exclusion while contributing cumulatively to an expanding conception of what education for a just society requires. Recognizing this layered historical genealogy is important for contemporary educational policy, since it clarifies that the goals of equality, inclusion, and global citizenship are not simply recent additions to educational practice but the latest articulation of a much older and still unfinished historical project.

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