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Our Role in and Responsibility Toward Social Justice

Abstract

People of color have been historically marginalized and stripped of equitable access to education throughout this country—which is a form of social injustice. Social injustice describes societal inequities that marginalize groups by diminishing access to quality education and other human rights. One way that Extension can be a catalyst to minimizing social injustice is to become more aware of societal disparties. There are also programmatic considerations that can help foster social justice. One such consideration is to increase programs that enhance social capital, as they can serve as a conduit of social justice.

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Social Injustice in Education

People of color have been historically marginalized and stripped of equitable access to education throughout this country. This inequity is one form of the social injustice that exists in America. Social injustice describes societal inequities that marginalize groups by diminishing access to quality education and other human rights. For example, in school systems, children of color are overrepresented in special education, disproportionately expelled from school, and are expected to alter their cultural norms to assimilate to standardized expectations (Ladson-Billings & Whiting, 2009). The result of these disparities is the "achievement gap" (Irvine, 2007; Kober & Alexandria, 2012).

However, Ladson-Billings (2006) has challenged this concept by asserting that in the U.S. there is not as much an achievement gap as there is an "education debt" that the educational system owes to so many students it has poorly served. Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that that the "historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral decisions and policies that characterize our society have created an education debt" that extends far beyond an isolated achievement gap (p.5).

Extension as a Catalyst Towards Social Justice

While the stated intent of the land-grant university and its subsequent Cooperative Extension Service is to provide equal access to education and research, the reality might be at best a mixed bag. Nationally, there has been discourse calling for the renewal of engagement and inclusion of more diversity on the part of these institutions (Hassel, 2004). While there have been efforts towards creating more diverse and inclusive programs and resources, "questions around who benefits—and who does not—from the actions of land-grant universities, are increasingly commonplace" (Hassel, 2004, para. 1).

Some Extension programs offer what is commonly referred to as "outreach programs" to provide programming for underrepresented youth and adults. However, there are often many disconnected outreach activities that may not be adequately funded; they are not held to the same standard of quality; and they do not provide resources to ensure sustainability that is generally associated with Extension's "historical" programs (NASULGC, 1999). Additionally, McCray (1994) shares that "from an Extension perspective African-American audiences are frequently labeled "hard to reach," leading to assumptions that African-Americans are uninterested in educational opportunities offered by Extension (para. 8). When in fact "most African-Americans recognize that education has been, and still is, the most successful exit from poverty" (McCray, 1994, para. 8). McCray (1994) reminds us that outreach and inclusion require understanding cultures and offering opportunities that are relevant to the audiences we aim to serve. The persistent challenges of inadequate outreach, misunderstood cultures, and lack of internal diversity all contribute to social injustice. They tend to be legacies of the institutions in which they function, thus hampering Extension's ability to have a sustained, systemic commitment to ending the social injustices that exist (para. 8)

One way that Extension can be a catalyst to minimizing social injustice is to become more aware of the disparities that exist within our programming as well as the larger societal context. Horsford (2011) says, "educators and educational leaders must be racially literate—understanding how race functions in the teaching, learning, administration, and implementation of policy..." (p. 97). This literacy and understanding is essential as we "aim to address some current realities of the system that present challenges to the environment we seek to develop" (McCray, 1994, para. 9). Beyond racial literacy, educators must 1) acknowledge inequity, 2) identify internal organizational and societal practices that are causing inequities, and 3) enact changes in organizational structures and outreach to contribute to social justice. Extension can then develop infrastructures designed to mitigate social injustice and offer programs and resources that directly promote the positive influences of social justice like building the social capital of youth.

Social Capital as a Catalyst of Social Justice

Chazdon, Allen, Horntvedt, and Scheffert (2013) define social capital as "the web of cooperative relationships between members of a community that allows them to act collectively to solve problems together" (p. 1). It is therefore plausible to consider the value of social capital in this context to "solve problems" partly attributed to social injustice (i.e., paying down of the education debt). There are programmatic considerations that can help bolster the engagement of African-American youth in 4-H programs. One example is the efforts of a multi-state research project that focuses on how the 4-H program promotes the enhancement of social capital and what types of programmatic considerations

(i.e., meaningful community service projects) should be employed. The notion that social capital can be a conduit to social justice is not novel. In fact, researchers have argued for years that people with high degrees of social capital—connection to community, networks, resources and institutions—are able to overcome barriers of social injustice. Nancy Erbstein (2013) says, "...in particular [one should consider] social capital's cultivation and role as a resource in supporting underrepresented young people's collective pursuit of community change."

In a study of social capital on 4-H youth in California, Enfield and Nathaniel (2013) found that youth who engage in community service projects tend to have higher degrees of social capital than youth who do not. The data, to this point, further suggest a correlation between the relationship of a caring adult and the degree of social capital a young person has. The study revealed that youth who have more trusting relationships—in particular bonding trust, which is trust in families, friends and neighbors—had higher degrees of social capital. The evidence seems to indicate that if youth have healthy relationships with adults in their community and are engaged in community service projects, there is a higher level of social capital (Enfield & Nathaniel, 2013). Youth who have social capital are better able to navigate and negotiate through the myriad of barriers and challenges that lead to social injustice. This ability is due in part to having stronger community connections and reliable, stronger adult allies. Mary Emery (2013) offers insight into the notion of the "spiraling up" of social capital through various types of program experiences. She posits:

> Adults engaged with youth in projects that contribute to community well-being also come to see youth as equal partners who can be trusted... [T]his transformation in cultural capital, changing the norms and behaviors that govern interaction among youth and adults leads to a tipping point... leading to more opportunities for youth involvement and ongoing increases in social capital (p. 57)

Social capital promotes a sense of agency—the belief that you can make a difference in your community (Nathaniel & Kinsey 2013). If we can better connect youth to their community in meaningful and purposeful ways, we improve our chances of creating the environments where youth feel a sense of efficacy and better connection. If we intentionally target our efforts to be more programmatically and culturally relevant and appropriate to African-American and Latino youth, using a social capital framework—we stand the chance of increasing the value and impact of our 4-H programs in these communities. We also increase the chances of perhaps improving the achievement gap; paying down the education debt and making the educational experience more contextual, more rich, and more meaningful.

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