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Permanent Injustice: Rawls' Theory of Justice and the Digital Divide

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Abstract

There are more than 700 million current Internet users, but the world population is approximately 6 billion (Trend 2001), indicating that computer technology is used by less than one-eighth of the population. Computers are becoming common tools in schools, often viewed as a democratic panacea despite the costs involved and despite the fact that the majority does not have access to computers and/or the Internet; this creates a digital divide for students, in which some are “more equal” than others. Educators, thinking they have solved the digital divide issue, create a placebo effect because most do not consider students' issues of transportation to the library, lack of funds for a home computer, or the time it takes to navigate an available public computer and Internet connection. In this paper, the author argues that Rawls’ theory of justice does not work in practice with regard to technology, or as a way to solve the digital divide and the inequalities in school funding. She argues that another ethical theory should guide technological funding and policies in schools, embracing theories by Levinas, Noddings, Davis, Freire, Nkrumah, and Buber, in order to open scholarly discussion on the issues of injustice and technological funding inequities.

Keywords

Digital divide; Rawls; Inequalities; Funding; Educational technology

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

Schools are microcosms of the world in which we live, and nothing represents this microcosmic experience better than the lunchroom on any given school day. As a child who despised lunchroom food, I can recall many instances when my friends and I would trade lunches and evaluate who had a better meal. Many times, during these exchanges, at least one lunch would not be satisfactory, and my friends would poke fun at the lunch and its consumer. We were all together in the cafeteria, yet even at an early age, we began to segregate ourselves according to race, class, and gender, even subconsciously. To paraphrase George Orwell, "all lunches are equal, but some lunches are more equal than others." In this vein, educators and administrators would like to believe that all schools are created equally, but in reality, some schools are "more equal" than others, especially in regard to technology.

Injustices and inequalities in our schools are as commonplace as school lunches, textbooks, and big yellow buses; these discrepancies exist in our schools on an everyday basis (Anyon, 1997; Bell, 1992; Cooper & Weaver, 2003; Kozol, 1991; Trend, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). Schools even perpetuate racism, classism, and sexism now through technological means (Cooper & Weaver, 2003; Trend, 2001). The grim realities of inequities in school funding are conspicuous, and the funding simultaneously masks and unmasks the injustices, which become so ubiquitous that they are being ignored and accepted. Teachers often assume that students have access to computers at home or at a public library, but they fail to consider the fact that many students cannot afford a computer, and many libraries are just as technologically under funded for disadvantaged students. Educators think that they have solved the digital divide issue. However, they have just created a placebo effect because most teachers and administrators do not consider the students' issues of transportation to the library, their lack of funds for a computer at home, and the time that it takes to wait for and navigate an available computer, printer, and Internet connection. In regard to technology and schools, administrators and educators embrace John Rawls' theory of justice, wherein economic inequalities are embraced supposedly to benefit everyone, but in practice as well as in funding, justice and equality do not exist.

In this article, I challenge educators to think about their actions with regard to funding, homework assignments, and their curriculum materials, and I hope that I open a chain of discussions challenging their assumptions about their students’ access to computers and the Internet. In addition, I want these educators to consider socio-economic class issues when they teach, especially with regard to technology. For instance, my niece and nephew often have homework where Internet research would be advantageous, even at times essential, but they do not have Internet access at home. Although the school library is available after school for them (with several older computers and programs), my niece and nephew are required to get on the bus immediately after school because their parents are not able to pick them up, and they live over half an hour away from their school. The family vehicles are old and unreliable and are only used for work and grocery shopping. The children are aware of class issues because they have limited technological possibilities when compared to their peers, and at times, they even argue that homework is “unfair.” With regard to their restrictions involving the Internet, homework as a whole is not fair for them, but none of their teachers considers their situation and the costs of computers and the Internet. Their teachers assume that every child has equal access to the World Wide Web (or should it be “World White Web”?), but do they really have the same access and opportunities now?

According to Rawls, theoretically, justice is fair when autonomy and a "veil of ignorance" exist, under which all members make beneficial decisions for every party, and society maintains justice because of this "veil of ignorance." Without any knowledge of positions, income, or status, under this veil, people would logically engage in decisions that help themselves, and injustice would not exist because it would not be reasonable under the "veil of ignorance." Two concepts direct these decisions: 1.) Everyone is supposed to have an equal right to basic liberty, and 2.) Inequalities are just when they are for everyone's advantage, and with Rawls' "difference principle," the inequalities should only benefit the least advantaged in society.

Within "A Theory of Justice," Rawls proclaims, "But there is no injustice in the greater benefits earned by a few that the situation of persons not so fortunate is thereby improved" (p.12-15). This theory of justice, wherein inequalities exist for just ends, especially for the least favored, is like an oxymoron in practice, *just injustice*, because in reality, the disadvantaged remain marginalized. How is this unequal justice possible though? How is it that injustice does not exist when one group has more opportunities and funding than another group? Rawls answers this and informs us, "Injustice, then, is simply inequalities that are not to the benefit of all" (p. 63). Thus, as long as everyone benefits, then the disparity in benefits is acceptable and even just. However, how does this difference in advantages truly help everyone? Can injustice and inequalities really create just ends or really help marginalized, disadvantaged groups?

If one group has more opportunities and financial support, especially concerning technology, then one group has less, and the inequalities and injustice become conspicuous. In regard to technology, one group – white, wealthy, suburban students – clearly has more opportunities and advantages in regard to computer access and usage than the inner-city group, the students who are primarily African-American and Latino (Cooper & Weaver, 2003; Trend, 2001). Administrators and educators perpetuate injustice and inequalities because of funding issues, and the inequities are conspicuous when one contemplates the minority students' disparity in technology levels. Despite the digital gap that exists at school and at home for these most disadvantaged students, school leaders maintain a "just stance" and argue that the technological inequalities are fair because all students supposedly have the same access to computers and the Internet currently. However, with more critical reflection, this equal access does not actually exist. My niece and nephew do not have the same technological access, and other marginalized students do not have the same access to computers at home and at school either. Thus, this technological injustice and digital divide is a threat to justice, especially when educators and administrators perpetuate this injustice by positing it as fairness.

Trend (2001), in *Welcome to Cyberschool: Education at the Crossroads in the Information Age*, uncovers the divide between poor and rich students in technology:

> Rather than democratizing education, technology is widening the gap between wealthy and poor institutions—as those with the least resources are least likely to afford technology. Schools that comprised more than 90 percent of students of color had a student-to-computer ratio of 17-to-1 in 2000, compared with the national average of 10-to-1. The historic lag in the introduction of computers into many rural and urban schools is yet another symptom of the savage inequalities in school funding from district to district. These inequities established the framework for differentials in computer access and usage that favored middle-class and wealthy students, contributing to what is now termed the "World White Web." (p. 145)

Emphasizing the lack of democracy in our schools, Trend posits the technological gap and the computer ratio differentiation, which adds another layer in the injustice and another catalyst for the "World White Web." Here, Trend reveals the disparity in the number of computers, but he fails to mention possible, almost certain, inequities in the quality and overall speed and usefulness of these computers. Technology advances rapidly, and computers become outmoded at an alarming rate. The disproportionate numbers only indicate the discrepancy in computer availability in schools. Thus, the incongruity of computer worth is yet another unexplored layer of this phenomenon of technological *just injustice* in the academic environment.

My niece and nephew have older computers to use at their school, and there is never a discussion about the quality of computers in the various school districts in my state. In the wealthier school districts, some students have new computers and new technological programs added to their schools each year, but this is not a possibility at my niece and nephew’s school now. Their computers have not been updated in several years, and they won’t be updated anytime in the near future because of school budget cuts and the lack of funding. However, when my brother asks about the school computer programs and the students’ access to the Internet, teachers as well as administrators tell him that their technological tools are “state of the art,” and they are giving every student the same opportunities to succeed and advance. However, are these teachers really providing this equal opportunity and “state of the art” technology when other schools have more computers, which are newer, and have better, faster equipment and programs? I don’t think that this technological issue pertaining to quality and usefulness is even discussed or acknowledged. As a side note, when one considers the rate at which computer technology advances, and new computers are outdated within six months, one must wonder about poorer schools that have computers which are five to ten years old (or more), and whether or not these tools are indeed “state of the art.” Thus, while some students have “more equal” technological tools at their disposal, some students are falling behind, and injustice follows without question or critique. I wonder if many administrators and educators are really aware of these socio-economic issues in regard to technology when they apply for grants, assign homework, and argue about funding needs. In my previous experiences with my niece and nephew, the injustice is masked and ignored altogether in their school, and unfortunately, the lesson for my niece and nephew is one of *just injustice*.

In addition to Trend's analysis concerning the disproportionate amount of computers in wealthier schools, the Educational Testing Service 1999 study, "Computers and Classrooms: The Status of Technology in U.S. Schools," revealed that poor students had half the access to computers in the classrooms compared to wealthier students. Why is this the case? Could racism, sexism, and classism serve as vehicles for funding and technological inequities, which are not addressed in our schools?

Latimer’s 2001 report, "The digital divide: Understanding and addressing the challenge" from the New York State Forum for Information Resource Management, argues that societal gaps create the digital divide, but the digital divide may widen existing social gaps and even create new ones (p. 8). Educators are creating a larger social gap between the rich and the poor, chiefly within technology now, despite the fact that they justify the inequities in funding, technology, and programs. Injustice and inequalities clearly exist in our schools and within technology, and these discrepancies do threaten justice and make it an impossibility so long as these disparities are perceived as being fair and right. Students are denied the right to technological knowledge, and administrators and educators ignore these divides, so long as the wealthy students and parents are satisfied. Rawls’ theory of justice may work *in theory*, but it does not work in practice, especially in regard to school funding and technology, because minority students are hurt as a result. Educators and administrators misuse Rawls’ theory to maintain injustice and inequities in our schools. For school reform to occur, this "miseducation" of minorities must end.

How wide is this "miseducative" and funding gap? Paraphrasing Lonnie Harp, Ron Renchler (1992) explains, "[...] the poorest school district in Texas spent $2,150 per pupil while the wealthiest spent $14,514, or 6.75 times more, per pupil. New York's wealthiest district spent $19,238 per pupil in 1989-90; its poorest district spent only $3,127 per pupil. In most states, two to five times more per pupil is spent in the wealthiest districts than in the poorest districts" (¶ 2). How can an equal education truly exist when funding incongruities are this conspicuous? This gross funding disparity perpetuates the notion that some schools are "more equal," despite the fact that some funds are "more equal" than others.

Jonathan Kozol (1991), in *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, uncovers the fact that the "surburbanites," wealthy parents and school donors in the suburbs, do not believe the funding inequities are unjust. Echoing Rawls’ theory of justice, the suburbanites ask, "So long as every child has a guarantee of education, what harm can it really be to let us spend a little more?" (p. 222). Educators, as well as these suburban parents, do not question funding inequalities, and some even defend the injustice, pitting poor students against wealthier students in a battle for finances and fairness, especially with computer technology. These parents and educators profess equality with "every child" and "guarantee of education;" however, they really advocate inequalities. While parents and educators manipulate Rawls’ theory of justice, they state, "[...] what harm can it really be to let us spend a little more," herein the very discourse implies "more equal."

The problem is that educators and parents alike, according to Jean Anyon (1997) in *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*, "regard ghetto children to be at best expendable, and at worst, appropriate targets" (p. 161). Why are these children referred to as “ghetto” children though? Why can they be “targets” and "expendable?" “Ghetto” here in the technological arena is not limited to race alone; indeed, class position plays more of an overreaching role (in conjunction with race, rather than in addition to) in the determination and subsequent exploitation of these supposed “expendable targets.” My niece and nephew are among many children in Alabama’s public schools (as well as schools all over the South, all over the United States) who grow up in an environment where computer technology is a luxury, not a given, and where college is a dream rather than an expectation. It is this more economically disadvantaged environment, not necessarily race alone, which places students like my niece and nephew in the position of becoming “at best expendable, and at worst, appropriate targets.” Children such as these grow up in a public school environment where the state and federal governments feel (quite blatantly under closer examination of funding discrepancies) that computer technology closer to “state of the art,” which would more adequately prepare these children for college and other further academic studies, is unnecessary, or worse – wasted. The message for these children is that they must be expendable and targets because they are the ones who do not have school districts or states “spend[ing] a little more.” The difference and discrimination involved with these children in their own schools on a daily basis is palpable.

In *The Universal Right to Education: Justification, Definition, and Guidelines*, Spring (2000) sets forth his idea of students’ rights in education, and the seventh right for every student is to have, "Knowledge of the use of electronic calculators and computers" (p. 128). However, with inequalities in funding and technology, poor students do not have this "universal right." These financially challenged students in urban and rural schools are falling behind their suburban and wealthier counterparts in technology because of funding inequities.

The majority of suburban students are white, and minority students are more predominant in inner-city schools, wherein funding and technology discrepancies occur. In addition, Trend (2001), focusing on inequities in Californian schools, reports:

> In California, more than 80 percent of African American, Latino, and Native American students find themselves in the poorest fifth of schools, where more than 25 students share each computer. Historically, these schools were the last to receive computers and last to become wired to the Internet. These are schools where every dollar committed to technology represents a dollar subtracted from somewhere else, where choices have to be made between computer workstations and roof repairs. Clearly, differences in digital literacy and technological competence must be linked, at least in part, to broader issues of school inequality. (p. 33)

Minority students are the last to receive technology and funds, and they are struggling to compete for jobs, which are increasingly more technical. Why is it that these students are the last to receive computer workstations and wiring for the Internet? Why are inequities in funding and technology acceptable? When administrators have to choose between fixing a roof and incurring technological expenses, the choice becomes no choice; it is masked, and justice becomes hidden.

What factors contribute to this masking? Could issues of race and gender be significant in these disparities? According to Cooper and Weaver (2003), within *Gender and Computers: Understanding the Digital Divide*, technological inequalities are based on gender and racial issues:

> Yet, access to training in IT [Informational Technology] is not equitable and some people have greater access than others [do] with the likelihood depending on the income, racial, and gender categories of which people are members. White Americans are more likely to have access to computers and the Internet than African-Americans. Males have more access than females, and wealthier Americans have more access regardless of race and gender. (p. 3)

White males have more means and more access to technology training, which gives them advantages over minority students in both academic and career fields. A white patriarchal hierarchy serves as the framework for technology as well as school funding, which excludes poor minorities. However, socioeconomic status may be more of a significant factor for inequities in technology than race or gender because of the immediate expense involved with technology. Though race, gender, and class are inextricably linked in the hierarchy of oppression, white males may benefit from technology more so than marginalized groups because of their overall class position.

Why is it that inequality in funding and technology hurts the minority students, enforces the status quo of injustice for these groups, and renders forth advantages for white males at the expense of the other students’ rights? Rawls' notion that inequalities are acceptable as long as everyone benefits is unjust, and is in this case, a detriment to the minority students because, despite their funding, they will never have the same amount of funding as the wealthier students, unless there is major funding reform. Thus, they will never have the opportunities to succeed that the suburban students do, especially in regard to technology without proper funding. The questions that educators should be positing are: How can we bring to the surface the impact of the digital divide, which is hidden under the guise of true democratic education? How can we change this injustice and inequity in technology and funding? What are the deeper implications of the discrepancies that minority students face? How can unjust school policies, wherein one group has more, ever benefit everyone? What are educators to do?

As long as educators and parents justify the inequalities with masks of ignorance, injustice will be perpetuated, and the minority students will fail to succeed, while their wealthier counterparts will. Educators need to reexamine how Rawls' theory of justice is used in practice and in their schools, especially in regard to technology and school funding, and they need to embrace a more practical ethical theory, which is just to all students. Trend (2001) suggests applying Levinas' ethical theory, which is premised on respect and recognizing the other, to funding and school technology that we currently have, despite the fact that Levinas' theory is largely absent. If educators use ethical works, without manipulating them, such as Buber's "I and Thou" ethic, Davis' "lifting as we climb," Freire's "conscientization," Levinas' "Face and Responsibility for the Other," Nkrumah's "consciencism," and Noddings' "ethic of care," then inequities in funding and practice may be resolved, and the threats of injustice will be assuaged (Buber, 1923; Davis, 1988; Freire, 1970; Levinas, 1985; Nkrumah, 1964; Noddings, 1984). Since these ethical frameworks are not premised on unjust principles, wherein one group has more, these scaffolds may hold the promise for building more equal access and funding for all students, instead of one select group.

In order to move towards a *just* technological school environment, first educators should recognize themselves in the faces of their students; they should take on the responsibility of acting ethically and with social justice in mind for all of their students. In addition, they should model and use Noddings' ethic of care to lift their students up, in spite of minority issues such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, or socio-economic class status, and they should be aware of these issues and even make their students more conscious of them, so that their students can succeed and feel as though school is as fair and equitable as possible. Without active scholarly discussion, these issues will never be contemplated, much less alleviated, and my hope is that this educational discussion continues, so some students are not "more equal." If we can fully bring the digital divide out from behind the mask of *just injustice*, we might be able to see students' success grow, as the number of Internet users certainly will in the future.

In the end, some students, like my niece and nephew, should not feel that homework is "unfair" because of their limitations, especially with regard to technology because of teachers' and administrators' assumptions that everyone has equal access to the Internet and computers. In the future, we need to remedy the notion of being "more equal" within our schools, and students should discover justice and equality as commonplace as lunchrooms, textbooks, and big yellow buses.

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