

Initial Teacher Education for Social Justice in South Africa: A Higher Education Policy Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa envisions a socially just society where all citizens enjoy fundamental human rights. Education is regarded as significant in realizing social justice (SJ). Hence, South African education policy is underpinned by the conviction that teachers are drivers of societal change and instrumental in creating a socially just society. It is therefore expected that initial teacher education (ITE) programs to train prospective teachers will be infused with knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes to develop the dispositions that would facilitate social justice in a democratic and open South African society. In this desk-top study, we investigate the attributes and competencies promoted and advanced through the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications Policy (MRTEQ) (2015) concerning the training of prospective South African teachers for the realization of social justice. We gathered our data through a literature review and a policy analysis, and we drew from critical social theory (CST), which argues for social transformation, human emancipation, and capacitation to make sense of our findings. We found that the MRTEQ (2015) promotes and advances knowledge, contextual awareness, and critical pedagogy as significant attributes and competencies for realizing social justice through education and, more specifically, ITE. The implication is that all initial teacher programmes must be designed to equip prospective teachers with these attributes to contribute to realizing social justice and transforming society. Against this backdrop, specific recommendations are made to develop these attributes in prospective teachers.

KEYWORDS

Higher Education; policy; pre-service teachers; initial teacher education; social justice; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa (SA) envisions a socially just and equitable society where all citizens enjoy fundamental human rights (RSA, 1996). Education plays a significant role in fighting for and realizing social justice (SJ) (Hart, 2012). Since teachers are at the forefront of this fight, the South African education system and schools should be equipped with teachers who not only share in the vision of a socially just society but who also embrace it, aspire towards it and through their teaching practice and pedagogy, try to realize it. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs aimed at training prospective teachers should, therefore, be infused with the values, knowledge, understanding, competencies, dispositions, and principles that would facilitate social justice in a democratic and open society grounded in freedom, equity and equality (RSA, 1996). South Africa has a history of gross social injustices. Indications are that the current education system is still plagued with and is actively reproducing social injustices. In this way, it is maintaining the status quo. It is through SJ that justice is realized, and the wrongs of the past are corrected. Teachers should, therefore, develop a sensitivity for social justice. We conform to the idea that sensitizing teachers about social justice starts with training prospective teachers for social justice.

For Feagin (2001, p. 5), SJ refers to a condition that:

Requires resource equity, fairness and respect for diversity, as well as eradicating existing forms of social oppression. Social justice entails a redistribution of resources from those who have unjustly gained them to those who justly deserve them. And it also means creating and ensuring the process of truly democratic participatory decision-making.

SJ finds expression in an education system where the state is committed "to ensuring that all South Africans have equal access to schooling" (RSA-DoE, 2001, p.13). More so, it is also about a fair, non-oppressive, inclusive, and participatory education.

SJ is a Constitutional imperative that permeates the entire Bill of Rights and informs our behavior toward each other (RSA, 1996: Preamble). Because of its importance for sustainability (Mandikonza & Lotz-Sisitka, 2016) and for an enhanced worth of life for all South African people, SJ in education policy should, therefore, not be seen as 'an add-on but fundamental to good education' (Gandolfi & Mills, 2022). As such, it should be integrated into the entire education sector. One way of doing this is to make SJ an integral and fundamental aim and objective of ITE programs. Various policies lay the foundation for the training of teachers in SA. Informed by the vision of the SA Constitution and expressed in the Higher Education Act (Act of 1997), these policies all envision and aspire to develop teachers that would firstly "establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights" (RSA, 1996: Preamble) and secondly "promote the values which underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom" (RSA-DoE, 1997: Preamble).

Informed by the noble vision of the SA Constitution and the expectation that education shall contribute towards the realization of a just society, ITE programs at institutions of higher learning should be infused with the language but also the values of SJ. For Sensoy and DiAngelo

(2017), social justice in teacher education must be conceptualized and enacted in ways that reflect its foundations of structural critique and the recognition of dominant identity privileges and inequity of all forms, and it should move beyond notions of equality and tolerance and towards action. As such, teaching for SJ involves action and social activities that permit individuals to participate as counterparts in social life while disabling inequality (Dube et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2013; Moloï et al., 2023). Therefore, ITE policy and programmes are expected to aim at disabling inequality by concentrating on diversity and SJ in the classroom (Case, 2017).

A plethora of higher education (HE) policies were promulgated over the years to cement a focus on SJ in SA education and develop prospective teachers with the attributes and dispositions required for SJ. These policy documents outline the HE response and its perceived role in achieving SJ. Therefore, to ascertain how SJ is promoted and advanced through ITE, one needs to analyze the policy framework that informs the HE practices and ITE. Such an analysis is important because education policies are conversational approaches, collections of actions, texts, objects, and practices that speak to broader social developments of teaching, such as the construction of the aim of teaching and the structure of the teachers (Ball, 2015). Policies are, therefore, directive, guiding and informing the education sector and the ITE praxis.

This paper investigates attributes and competencies promoted and advanced through the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications Policy (MRTEQ) (2015) concerning the training of prospective South African teachers for the realization of SJ. In doing so, we will first elaborate on the meaning of SJ. We give an overview of the HE policy framework that informs ITE. We analyze the MRTEQ (2015) and other relevant policy documents to determine how SJ is articulated in these documents and what competencies and attributes are promoted and advanced for the realization of SJ. In conclusion, the implications for initial teacher training are outlined, and certain recommendations to improve ITE programs are presented.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Social Theory (CST) underpins this paper, which emphasizes that the process by which meanings are generated and adopted should be as participatory and unconstrained as possible. Its central concern is articulating a model of processes or conditions that help make social decisions rational and just. The MRTEQ policy governs processes and practices related to teacher education in South Africa (Department of Higher Education, 2015). In terms of MRTEQ (2015), there is the quest to establish how it will contribute to the liberation of pre-service students using the practice of critique and transformative knowledge that reflect their full and lived complexities. Concerning the latter, CST argues for social transformation, human emancipation, and capacitation (Freeman & Vascoceles, 2010). These critical dimensions of CST have been developed from the interest to create conditions for open discussion and democratic resolution of practical issues. At the same time, emancipation means release from, or removal

of, conditions that block autonomy or responsibility. CTS does not always offer a blueprint solution to a given problem; instead, that part of the solution can be found in how the problem is addressed (Leonardo, 2004). In this paper, we investigate the attributes and competencies promoted and advanced through the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications Policy (MRTEQ) (2015) concerning the training of prospective South African teachers and the realization of SJ. Because of its potential to engender social transformation, which is also a goal of SJ, this theory is regarded as an appropriate lens for this study.

METHODOLOGY

In realizing the aim of this study, a qualitative approach was followed. A combination of primary and secondary sources was consulted, and data was collected through a careful and thorough literature review and an analysis of various HE policy documents specifically addressing ITE. This was done to investigate the attributes and competencies promoted and advanced through the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications Policy (MRTEQ) (2015) concerning the training of prospective South African teachers for the realization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept justice

Understanding the concept of SJ requires conceptual clarity of the concept of 'justice'. Efforts to define the concept 'of justice' are hampered by its multiple meanings resulting from the fact that meanings of justice change regularly and vary geographically, momentarily, and socially as well as over politics, place, time, and academic philosophies (DeMatthews, 2018; Dube et al., 2022; Hart, 2012). For Rawls (1971), justice is about fairness or equity. Accordingly, as the foundational idea of justice, fairness concerns avoiding bias (Sen, 2009). More so, "justice as fairness also points to the moral powers that people have, that relates to their sense of justice and for a conception of the good" (Letseka, 2014, p.544); as such, it relates to the ability to strive towards the common good, by avoiding biases in one's evaluations, by becoming aware of the interests and concerns of others, and by avoiding being influenced by selfish or personal interests or priorities and prejudices. With its violent history of gross inequalities, injustices, and racial discrimination, "a shared conception of justice [will] establishes the bonds of civic friendship" (Rawls in Letseka, 2014, p.544) that the SA population longs for.

The Concept of Social Justice

Similar to the concept 'of justice', conceptual clarity about the concept of SJ is equally challenging to find; hence, DeMatthews (2018, p.546) regards it as a "regularly used catchphrase". With no integrated or fixed meaning (Ayers et al., 2009), SJ is best described as an "umbrella term" that is relative in nature (Furman, 2012, p.193). Its "plurality of meanings" (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2002, 499) renders the concept of SJ somewhat ambiguous, ideologically loaded, and fraught, leaving the thought of SJ fairly open to discrete clarification (Mills &

Ballantyne, 2016), with the subsequent potential for abuse (Villegas, 2007). Notwithstanding its definitional vagueness, some form of conceptualization of SJ is necessary.

Madonsela and Lourens (2022) associate SJ with the "just, fair, and equitable distribution of all opportunities, resources, benefits, privileges, and burdens in a society, group and between societies". It also includes several principles such as fairness, equality, dissimilarity, equal opportunity, favourable action, multiplicity, moral standards, respect and care, harmony, human rights, and self-esteem (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Teise & Gillard, 2019).

SJ also encompasses justice that demands social actions that permit people to participate as equals in social life while deactivating disparity to ensure that individuals function as complete transformative educational agents (McDonald, Kazemi & Kavanagh, 2013). SJ is concerned with the human situation and with "the equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms by all" (Madonsela & Lourens, 2022, p.4). SJ is, therefore, an endless activity designed to address any form of injustice and inequality. This is accentuated by the United Nations (in Madonsela & Lourens, 2022, p.4), which regards SJ as "an underlying principle of peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and amongst nations". As such, SJ becomes a sine qua non for the sustainability of every society. To contribute towards the sustainability of South African society, ITE programs in SA universities are expected to equip all prospective teachers with knowledge, values, skills, and competencies that will enable them to contribute towards the SJ agenda of SA and SA education.

Social Justice in South African Higher Education and Initial Teacher Education Policy: Laying the Early Foundations

To find its way into the policy framework of both HE and ITE, one must appreciate that SJ is a foundational principle, aim, and objective of the ruling party and, subsequently, of government (ANC, 1994; Govender & Fataar, 2015). For example, in its Draft Policy Framework for Education and Training the ANC (1994, Part 1, Section 1) states that "[the] education process "...shall encourage peace, justice, tolerance, and stability in our communities and nation" and that educational aims and objectives will be underpinned by the "reconciliation of liberty, equality, and justice so that citizens freedom of choice is exercised within a social and national context of equality of opportunity and the redress of imbalances". These ideals were taken up in the Constitution of South Africa, which informed developments within the SA political landscape, the conceptualization of the nature of the future SA HE sector and the identification of values that will inform that sector (cf. NEPI, 1992). As a result, more nuanced pronouncements towards SJ in ITE became entrenched within education policy and legislation.

In this regard, White Paper 1 (RSA-DoE 1995, Chapter 3: Section 1) envisions "a just and equitable system which provides good quality education and training to learners young and old throughout the country", and it articulates the guiding principles of education under the new government and for the democratic SA. These principles include redress, equity, respect for diversity, democracy, liberty, equality, justice, open access and quality (RSA-DoE, 1995). Focusing on HE in particular, White Paper 3 (RSA-DoE, 1997, Section 1.6) envisions a HE sectors

that will address "the inequities, imbalances, and distortions that derive from its past and present structure" and that will be "transformed to meet the challenges of a new non-racial, non-sexist and democratic society committed to equity, justice and a better life for all". As such, the role of HE in SA is to "promote the values which underlie an open and democratic society based on human dignity, equality and freedom" and to promote "values of an open and democratic society, as desirable important, and relevant outcomes of Teacher Education in higher education in South Africa" (RSA-DoE, 1997, Preamble). In this way, the values and principles of SJ not only became entrenched within HE and ITE policy documents of the new SA, but SJ also became the guiding principle to prevent social injustices and inequalities of the past from being repeated. This, of course, places certain expectations on ITE policy.

Social Justice in South African Higher Education and Initial Teacher Education Policy: The Current Policy Context

The abovementioned documents laid the foundation for various subsequent policy positions such as the Size and Shape Document – Towards a New Higher Education Landscape – Meeting the Equity, Quality and Social Imperatives of South Africa in the 21st Century (2000), the National Plan for Higher Education (February 2001), and the New Academic Plan for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education (2002). Drawing on the SJ message of their predecessors, these policy documents reflect intertextuality. Intertextuality is "the presence within it of elements of other texts" (Wagenaar, 2014). Policies are, therefore, not ahistorical and without a context. Instead, they are shaped within a particular historical moment in a particular relationship.

Informed by these policy documents and demonstrated through their intertextuality, a policy framework was established that is specifically directed towards ITE. Forming part of this framework are the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ, 2011 and Revised 2015); the National Framework for Teacher Education and Development in South Africa (2006); the Norms and Standards for Educators (2000); and various related policies. In these policy documents, the ideal for SJ through education is overtly re-emphasized. In this regard, the DoE (RSA-DoE, 2006, Section 13) expects education to respond to societal and educational disparities by assisting to

"prepare each succeeding generation of children with the appropriate knowledge, skills and values to understand such challenges and contribute to overcoming them, as well as to fulfil their personal potential and aspirations. *Teacher education, including continuing professional development, has the vital role of equipping teachers to undertake this task*" [own emphasis].

For Reddy (2021), critical to the adjustment of higher education policy is an emphasis on including SJ issues in the teacher education curriculum. Sayed et al. (2018, p.35) confirm that the "transformation in the professional development discourse of teachers in South Africa (in policy and interventions) has been aimed at ensuring that teachers are prepared to become good quality teachers with the knowledge, subject expertise and subject Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as well as with the dispositions for democracy and social justice".

This focus on SJ is articulated in various related policy documents. The Department of Education and Training (DHET) (RSA-DHET, 2015, Appendix A) underscores the pronouncements of the Norms and Standards for Educators (2000). This document identifies the collective roles teachers should perform as part of the profession. Whilst we acknowledge the interrelatedness and the interdependence of these roles, under their *community, citizenship, and pastoral role*, teachers are expected to "uphold the Constitution and promote democratic values and practices in schools and society" (RSA-DHET, 2015, Appendix A). In addition, the Basic Competencies of a Beginner Teacher (RSA-DHET, 2015, Appendix C) expect teachers to "know who their learners are and how they learn", "to understand the needs of the learners", "to understand diversity in the South African context to teach in a manner that includes all learners" and to "display appropriate values and conduct themselves in a manner that befits, enhances and develops the teaching profession".

Concerning the workload of the teacher as articulated in the Personnel Administrative Measures (RSA-DBE, 2016, Section A.4.2.5), is it expected that a teacher will during the formal school day and official period of duty "give his/her full attention to the duties entrusted to him/her". These duties relate to the roles of a teacher as articulated in the Norms and Standards of Educators (2000) and taken up in MRTEQ (RSA-DHET, 2015). As such, teachers are expected to contribute towards learners' social and political development and advance SJ. A further expectation is put on ITE programmes to train teachers in such a way that they will "acknowledge, uphold and promote basic human rights, as embodied in the Constitution of South Africa" and

3.1 respect the dignity, beliefs and constitutional rights of learners and, in particular, children, which includes the right to privacy and confidentiality;

3.2 acknowledge the uniqueness, individuality, and specific needs of each learner, guiding and encouraging each to realize their potentialities;

3.3 strives to enable learners to develop a set of values consistent with the fundamental rights contained in the Constitution of South Africa (RSA-DoE, 2000: Section 3).

In this regard, current ITE policy promotes an orientation towards teacher training that would develop dispositions, knowledge, values and practices for SJ. In this regard, ITE curricula are expected to prepare teachers to work towards SJ. It was indicated earlier that MRTEQ (2015) is fundamental in ITE. Teachers should have certain knowledge, competencies, skills and attitudes to realize SJ through education. In this study, we analyze the MRTEQ (2015) to ascertain how much knowledge, awareness and critical pedagogy are advanced and promoted. We focused on the MRTEQ (2015) because it is a fundamental source for teacher training in South African higher education. MRTEQ was developed in 2011 and revised in 2015 to ensure that all teacher education policies and programmes are re-oriented, re-formulated, and adjusted to respond to Constitutional imperatives and national HE policy ideals. These ideals also include SJ and a socially just society. We focus on knowledge, awareness and critical pedagogy because of their prominence in the literature on the role of education in advancing SJ

(cf. Ayers et al., 2009; Adams et al., 2007). More so, we also believe that to realize SJ through education, teachers should have certain forms of knowledge; they need to develop a particular awareness and employ critical pedagogical skills in their classrooms. Next is an exposition of the extent to which MRTEQ actively and explicitly promote and advances these competencies and attributes.

MRTEQ (2015) and the promotion of knowledge

Training pre-service teachers is challenging and includes a broad range of knowledge to achieve (Lawrence & Butler, 2010). Teacher training is socially negotiated and contingent on knowledge of self, learners, subject matter, curricula, and setting (Hollins et al., 2014). Lee (2011) also confirms that teachers need to have knowledge of and understand who they are and their views on the sources of inequities and privileges. Within the context of SJ, such knowledge will validate, appreciate and celebrate diversity, which will counter marginalization and other forms of oppression and injustices. In this way, knowledge is closely linked to justice and the SJ agenda (Cochran-Smith, 2010). Rusznyak et al. (2023) also believe that the emphasis on different bodies of knowledge requires that it be understood and used as a basis to realize transformation and agency.

However, although the integration of knowledge seems desirable, integrating various types of knowledge, in practice, is not automatic or easy to achieve (Rusznyak & Bertram, 2015). Teachers should, therefore, have the skill to integrate various forms of knowledge and use that to pursue SJ. Knowledge of varying educational backgrounds is similarly important since SA learners' schooling contexts differ significantly.

In addition, care should be taken that ITE curricula do not foster a conceptualization of knowledge as "a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider knowing nothing" (Freire, 2000, p.61). Similarly, Hooks (1994 in Lee, 2011) warns that one way of knowing shouldn't replace another. Instead, various forms of knowledge and multiple ways of knowing should be recognized and encouraged. In that way, education will not be accused of "projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, [which is] a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, [and] negat[ing] education and knowledge as processes of inquiry" (Freire, 2000, p.61).

For MRTEQ (2015), knowledge is important for teacher training. In this regard, it identifies disciplinary, pedagogical, fundamental, and situational knowledge (RSA-DHET, 2015) as important forms of knowledge to be included in ITE curricula and programmes. Disciplinary knowledge should be about education, its foundations, and specific specialized subject matter, ethics, and relationships. Pedagogical knowledge should be about teaching principles, methods, techniques, learners' understanding, curriculum methodology, assessment, and practical learning during teaching practice. Whilst fundamental knowledge should concern the ability to converse competently in a second official language and use information and communication technologies as well as academic literacies, situational knowledge should encapsulate that

which includes integrated and applied knowledge about varied learning contexts and environments and diverse challenges.

It is anticipated that implementing these types of knowledge will contribute towards the transformation of the ITE and enable pre-service teachers to contribute meaningfully to SJ. This is confirmed by DHET (RSA-DHET, 2015: Section 2.4), which maintains that teachers should be able to incorporate "situational and contextual elements that assist teachers in developing competencies that enable them to deal with diversity and transformation". As such, to facilitate SJ, HE policy expects that the ITE curriculum be structured so that it exposes students to different types of knowledge and appropriate experiences that would enable them to respond effectively to the needs of learners and to facilitate inclusion instead of exclusion.

MRTEQ (2015) further indicates that part of the knowledge mix is general pedagogical knowledge, including knowledge of learners, learning, curriculum, and general instructional and assessment strategies" as well as specialized pedagogical content knowledge, which is knowledge of how to transform subject- and phase-specific content into appropriate representations for diverse learners. In addition, MRTEQ (DHET, 2015) states that beginner teachers should draw on their knowledge base to teach effectively and to display competencies such as knowing "how to teach their subject(s) and how to select, determine the sequence and pace content following both subject and learner needs," "tailor their teaching [to the learners' needs]," "use available resources appropriately, to plan and design suitable learning programmes," and "use the results of assessment to improve teaching and learning" (RSA-DHET, 2015, p.62).

MRTEQ (2015) and the promotion of contextual awareness

According to Darling-Hammond (2017), contextual awareness refers to the ability to perceive and understand the social, cultural, and physical environment one is part of. Teaching and learning take place within a particular environment. Context thus puts content into perspective and aids its successful delivery (Reio, 2011). For Segal (2011), the most effective way to address and change structural inequalities and social injustices is to create opportunities where people can gain deep contextual knowledge. It is through such knowledge that teachers and learners not only become aware of oppression and social injustices- within their context but they are also prompted to act upon that. For Freire (2000, p.47), to "surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action, they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity".

Inequality, poverty, injustices, exclusion, and other social ills mark the SA education context. In this regard, education has an important role to play in eradicating social injustices. Carrim (2019) posits that education systems are not politically and ideologically neutral structures outside society's struggles for SJ. Considering this, ITE programs must deepen student teachers' consciousness of the reality of society (Christie, 2018). Context and contextual factors such as culture, race, gender, and socio-economic status will determine the degree to which education is liberating or oppressive. To be liberating – thus to pursue SJ - ITE policy and

programmes should therefore establish conditions in which pre-service teachers are trained to uphold the rights of all learners, treat all learners fairly, provide equitable access to educational opportunities and uphold anti-discrimination principles in their classrooms (Carrim, 2019).

Therefore, context and contextual awareness are essential for the successful execution of education geared towards SJ. Thus, if teachers are not aware of group dynamics, as they pertain to social identities and multi-cultural perspectives found within a particular context (Hackman, 2005), SJ will not be realized. Therefore, awareness and understanding of the context of education will assist SA prospective teachers in advocating for equitable and inclusive educational practices and implementing these in their practice. ITE programs should, therefore, enable student teachers to develop a sensitivity and a critical awareness of the context within which education is delivered.

Such an awareness will enable prospective teachers to move beyond merely advocating for SJ and become agents committed to the transformative potential (Pantić, 2015). A lack of contextual awareness may impede prospective teachers' capacity to adapt and respond to learners' needs. Education policy, therefore, requires that the ITE curriculum be structured to develop prospective teachers' awareness of their context and an understanding of the uniquely South African educational context so that they can teach inclusively (DHET, 2015). Inclusion is important to counter marginalization and bridge the divides that exist in the SA educational context, contributing to the injustices in society.

MRTEQ (DHET, 2015) promotes situational learning. This assumes that newly trained teachers know, are aware of, and understand the varied learning contexts of education and can draw reflexively from integrated and applied knowledge to work flexibly and effectively in various contexts (DHET, 2015). The implication is that ITE curricula should provide pre-service teachers with the opportunity to learn about and understand the environments in which they teach, the learners and communities they serve, and how to approach their work in light of these factors.

MRTEQ (2015) and the promotion of critical pedagogy

Critical pedagogy as an educational approach is steered by the need to support students in deeply understanding social inequalities such as class, race, and gender, as well as their role as important subjects (Nelson & Chen, 2022). Jemal (2017, p.602) defines critical pedagogy as "consciousness and action that produce the potential for change at one or more socio-ecosystemic (e.g., individual, institutional)". Critical pedagogy aims for educators to examine their preconceptions and biases to understand better "difference" or "otherness". In adopting critical frameworks to education, ITE programmes will enable teachers to identify the knowledge and skills being valued, the privileged groups, and what is happening for those who are different (Smyth, 2001).

In this regard, critical pedagogy becomes important as using critical pedagogies in ITE programs will enable pre-service teachers to be conscientious of the various manifestations of

SJ concerns and as future teachers to interact with the issues on both personal and societal levels in their roles as future teachers.

Critical pedagogy centralizes the idea that knowledge emerges in a two-way exchange between teacher and learner – thus emphasizing dialectic practice and reflexivity (Freire, 2013). To promote critical pedagogies, narrative inquiry and storytelling (Garret, 2016) can effectively be utilized in ITE programs to stimulate critical thought and reflexivity in pre-service teachers. These methodologies will assist pre-service teachers in drawing comparisons and links between one another and drawing contrasts and contradictions. Furthermore, teachers may be better able to identify unfair, immoral, insensitive, and restricting educational methods and respond in more socially just ways if they are allowed to share their own stories and those of others. The purpose of critical pedagogy is to provide a teaching method that empowers learners to become independent thinkers and not just consumers of information; it has value for ITE because it promotes critical thinking, education for social change, and intellectual liberation. The ITE emphasis on SJ will ensure that all students are included in the learning process and benefit from a curriculum that fosters critical thinking, self-reflection, and the examination of power dynamics (Pitzman & Balconi, 2019). It is also through a critical pedagogy that teachers become 'problem-posers'. According to Shor (1993, p.26), a teacher as a problem-poser "asks thought-provoking questions and encourages students to ask their own questions. Through problem-posing, students learn to question answers rather than merely to answer questions".

In this instance, MRTEQ (DHET, 2015) emphasize "synthesis and research on the foreground and emphasis on "what is to be learned and how is to be learned". Furthermore, the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997, p.2) states that higher education in South Africa should promote the values underlying an open and democratic society. As such, it requires that traditional methods of instruction be reimagined, not only for pre-service teachers but for teacher educators, too. The phrases "what is to be learned and how it is to be learned" and "to promote values underlying an open and democratic society" suggest an orientation towards critical pedagogy. With a focus on SJ in ITE curricula, the teachers can go beyond simply advocating for SJ and become agents of SJ who are devoted to its transformational potential (Pantić, 2015). Such a focus creates the opportunity for teachers to develop the dispositions to "[equip] learners, irrespective of their socio-economic background, race, gender, physical ability or intellectual ability, with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country" (RSA DBE, 2012b: Section 1.3(b)). More so, an SJ focus promoted by HE policy and supposed to be reflected in ITE curricula will also significantly contribute towards sustainability. This is because current approaches to education are being blamed for causing and promoting unsustainability through social injustices (Gadotti, 2008), thus making current education unfit to realize sustainable development.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Critical social theory (CST) is grounded in the belief that education and intervention can improve or alter society. As such, it aims towards "the improvement of the human condition" (Ngwenyama, 2002, p.268). In this regard, CST regards all social practices, including education, as interventions, irrespective of any claims to neutrality or whether they advocate from a particular stance constrained and supported by knowledge, interests, and needs (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). CST places a high premium on knowledge. In this regard, CST implicitly aims at the emancipatory function of knowledge (Leonardo, 1996).

Critical social theory offers a framework that challenges everyday practice's theoretical or ideological underpinnings (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010). Arguably, contextual awareness provides the groundwork for analysis whilst the CTS could be applied to challenge and critique the power dynamics as all members of that society should feel empowered to carry out their practices in ways that foster democratic and empowering processes and outcomes while continuously monitoring those processes and outcomes for evidence of social injustice (Freeman & Vasconcelos, 2010).

Critical pedagogy is relevant to CST because it creates awareness of education and schools' role in social reproduction (Vossoughi & Gutierrez, 2016). After this, it promotes capacitation and emancipation. CST does not promote theory for theory's sake; instead, it "encourages the production and application of theory as part of the overall search for transformative knowledge" (Leonardo, 2004, p.11). Critical pedagogy is also valuable because it will enable teachers to design teaching experiences to sharpen learners' critical thinking and develop their agency to act collectively to build a more just society. Being transformative in nature, critical pedagogy will enable teachers to identify obstacles towards SJ and teach in ways that demonstrate commitment to eradicate social injustices.

As such, SJ in ITE supposes the development of teachers as agents of change. To be an agent of change is to "intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (Bandura, 2001). It implies a personal drive within teachers to bring about a change, specifically an improvement in a dire situation. Being an agent of change, therefore, suppose that teachers deliberately "choose to initiate actions in support of an improvement in teaching and/or student learning beyond their own classrooms" (Van der Heijden et al. 2015, p.684) to "cultivate powerful educational environments" (Case, 2017). In the SA context, such environments are supposed to be places where learners develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions for democratic citizenship. More so, it is also a place where they learn the values of Ubuntu as a practice of justice and where they thus learn how to be humane. To be humane suggests that one's conduct is guided by respect for and tenderness toward others' beings (Johnstone, 1981). It suggests an affirmation, validation, appreciation of all human beings and a desire to care for them.

This paper aimed to investigate the extent to which MRTEQ (2015) promote and advance teacher training for social justice. MRTEQ (2015) apparently advanced the enactment of SJ by training pre-service teachers. An important insight is that the intense focus on SJ within HE policy and ITE curricula supposes reimagining the teaching and the development and adoption of

SJ-oriented teaching approaches. This may include a multi-cultural or culturally responsive approach to teaching, an appreciation for diversity and the impact of social, economic, and cultural factors on teaching and learning, deliberate efforts to create unbiased and liberating learning spaces, a critical examination of the self and the validation and appreciation of different forms of knowledge.

This study illuminated knowledge, contextual awareness, and critical pedagogy as essential dispositions of SJ. In terms of knowledge, the HE policy expects that the ITE curriculum be structured to expose students to different types of knowledge and appropriate experiences that would enable them to respond to the needs of learners effectively. As such, knowledge should assist in transforming education and society. Contextual awareness is necessary for the successful execution of the content as it pertains to social identities and multi-cultural perspectives. Therefore, awareness and understanding of the context of education will assist SA pre-service teachers in advocating for equitable and inclusive educational practices and implementing these in their practice. Critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching that empowers learners to become independent and critical thinkers, not just information consumers. It characterizes education for SJ and liberation. With an emphasis on SJ, all students should be included in the teaching and learning process. All should benefit from a curriculum that fosters critical thinking, self-reflection, and the examination of power dynamics. Therefore, the expectation is that ITE programmes will equip pre-service teachers with approaches that enable them to make well-informed judgments that will contribute to the transformation and SJ agenda.

This study created a sensitivity to the importance and relevance of knowledge, critical pedagogy and contextual awareness for teacher education and the pursuit of SJ thorough education. It highlighted the value of HE policy and its responsibility on the broader HE sector to critically examine existing ITE curricula and programmes to establish their responsiveness towards SJ. Such an examination is also essential to determine how existing ITE curricula and programmes empower prospective educators to recognize and combat oppression, injustice, and inequality and act on it through their practice.

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