Opinion

Curriculum Proposal for Social Justice Education: A Case Study within High School and College in Japan

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Abstract: During the COVID-19 pandemic, the socially vulnerable were placed in an even more difficult position. High school and college liberal arts education on social justice is needed to address the possible emerging and re-emerging infectious disease pandemics. A desirable educational curriculum to actualize this should include (1) Basic Theory of Ethics and Social Justice—justice and goodness, justice in Ancient Greece, deontology, utilitarianism, and the principle of inequality—, (2) Social Justice Theories—liberal egalitarianism, communitarianism, and social structural approach, (3) Psychology and Behavioral Economics—social intuitionist model, implicit association test, and nudge—, and (4) Advocacy—racism and xenophobia, elderly, disabilities, women, gender and justice—. The curriculum on social justice aims to help students understand the value of social justice, recognize inequality and disparity in society, and acquire the ability to address the widening social gap and inequality. The concept of justice is internationally diverse. Thus, extracting “social justice” in the context of each country’s culture and adding it to the social justice education curriculum is important.

Keywords: education; COVID-19; curriculum; ethics; Japan; social justice

1. Introduction

Since early 2020, COVID-19 has claimed many lives. It has both contributed to and exposed disparities and discriminations that were undoubtedly present but invisible. For example, in the United States, despite allocating scarce medical resources to maximize effective life-saving treatment for COVID-19, the mortality rate was higher for African than European Americans.

Social disparities have also become apparent in Japan because of COVID-19. Examples include poverty among young women forced to work in precarious jobs, isolation of older people, and job losses for foreign workers [1]. Discrimination by the Japanese against other Asians—which existed before COVID-19—has been deepened by the pandemic [2]. Another social characteristic of the pandemic is the discrimination against and avoidance of people who had not previously been placed in socially vulnerable positions, such as healthcare workers.

Bioethicists must address the social injustices highlighted by COVID-19. Promoting social justice in the post-pandemic world with interventions in the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) is necessary to reduce health disparities, strengthen citizen solidarity, and address oppression as a social structure. One possible way to achieve this is by providing educational programs on social justice that are based on accumulated research in bioethics or public health ethics. Such educational programs should be offered to the public. However, the education of the younger generation is of particular social importance. The education of high school and college students on social justice issues is beneficial for their later participation in society. Further, educating the future generations of society is socially meaningful to prepare them for new and different infectious diseases that may emerge in the future.
Social justice education is of paramount importance. However, a concrete implementation plan for integrating social justice education into the curriculum is lacking. Therefore, in this paper, we discuss and propose a concrete plan for a series of educational programs for high school and college liberal arts students on “Infectious Diseases and Social Justice” in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

In junior high and high schools, basic education on social justice and ethics is provided in Japan in the subjects of “citizenship” or “ethics”. Lectures on philosophy and ethics are also offered in university liberal arts programs. However, philosophy and ethics are not required in many universities and are often elective. Thus, in Japan, although the basics of social justice are covered in secondary education, opportunities for further in-depth study are limited, and more in-depth education is needed.

The need for social justice education has been asserted in many countries. In addition, many universities, particularly in Europe and the United States, offer social justice education as a program to their students. For example, the University of Toronto has a department for social justice education, which conducts research and education on education law [3]. Based on this, the university offers a substantial education program to students pursuing a master’s course. This program covers contemporary topics, such as gender studies, while considering historical issues of social equality in Canada [4]. Further, regarding social justice education offered to high school students, a summer course initiative has been reported in the United States in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. Additionally, some educational evaluations have been reported. For example, the educational evaluation of the “Fair Battles” program in Switzerland, which focuses on consumption habits and social justice, reported an increase in high school students’ learning and behavioral scores due to social justice education [6]. The basic line of social justice education must be arranged in each country’s historical and geographical context, considering its culture and traditions. In Japan, university programs on social justice education are difficult to find, and virtually no social justice-specific education is conducted for high school students.

2. Foundational Concepts and Outline of a Curriculum Plan

2.1. The Goal of the Program

In the context of the current state of education on social justice, defining the learning objectives of a curriculum on social justice for high school or college liberal arts courses is appropriate as follows:

The goal of the program is to provide students with an understanding of the value of social justice, an awareness of inequality and disparity in society, and the ability to address widening social disparities and social inequality in possible future public health crises, such as infectious disease pandemics.

We propose that the following five points be met as the curriculum characteristics required to reach this learning goal:

1. Based on a theoretical understanding of social justice, the curriculum is designed to provide applied knowledge that leads to social practice.
2. The curriculum should enable students to understand social justice theories by following the historical process to acquire systematic knowledge.
3. The curriculum includes philosophical and ethical theories of social justice and knowledge of social sciences and economics.
4. The study of social justice should provide firsthand knowledge, enabling students to experience social inequality and discrimination. From this perspective, students will encounter “the voices of society”.
5. Active learning will promote learners’ awareness and knowledge retention.

2.2. Curriculum Framework

Based on the above design principles, the specific curriculum should consist of four parts, as presented in Table 1.
1. Basic Theory of Ethics and Social Justice,
2. Social Justice Theory,
3. Psychology and Behavioral Economics, and
4. Advocacy.

Table 1. Four aspects of the Social Justice Curriculum.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Item</th>
<th>Sub-Item</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Basic Theory of Ethics and Social Justice</td>
<td>Justice and Goodness</td>
<td>Daniels’ Perspectives</td>
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<td>Justice in Ancient Greece</td>
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<td>Deontology and Justice</td>
<td>Sandel’s Perspectives</td>
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<td>Utilitarianism and Justice</td>
<td>Young’s Perspectives</td>
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<td>Justice and the principle of inequality</td>
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<td>(2) Social Justice Theories</td>
<td>The Liberal Egalitarian Approach</td>
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<td>The Communitarian Approach</td>
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<td>Social Structural Approach</td>
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<td>(3) Psychology and Behavioral Economics</td>
<td>Social Intuitionist Model</td>
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<td>Implicit Association Test</td>
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<td>(4) Advocacy</td>
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Each major section should be divided into subsections, which are detailed in the next section.

Having witnessed the social injustice caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we can operationalize social justice education curricula so that our experiences can be used to address emerging and reemerging infectious disease pandemics that might strike the international community in the future.

2.3. Education Timing

In Japan, teenagers’ political participation has been promoted in recent years. A 2015 amendment to the Public Office Election Law (Act 43 on 19 June 2015) lowered the voting age from 20 to 18 years [7]. In addition, the age of adulthood was lowered to 18 years in 2022, based on amendments to the Civil Code in 2018 (Act 59 on 20 June 2018), which granted teenagers the right to enter into a variety of contracts [8]. These increased opportunities for political participation, and social activities for teenagers require them to be aware of their duties and rights as adults and develop civic virtues. Education on social justice is crucial to building an equal society, and considering Japan’s legal reforms, social justice education must be provided to teenagers.

Our intended learners are high school students and junior undergraduate students. Bridging the two educational systems of high school and university to provide social justice education is challenging, especially given high schools’ rigid curriculum. However, establishing a system of collaboration between high school and university education is extremely significant from the educational coherence standpoint. High schools have a relatively flexible subject called “Period for Inquiry-Based Cross-Disciplinary Study”. This “subject was updated during the Courses of Study’s revision by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2018 [9]. It aims to “cultivate the qualities and abilities to better discover and solve problems while considering one’s own way of being and living through cross-disciplinary and integrated study, using the view and thinking of inquiry” [9]. Learning about social justice as part of this subject would be useful for high school students and would also be consistent with the educational philosophy outlined in the Courses of Study.
Additionally, bridging the two educational systems, high school and university, by developing a comprehensive program to conduct social justice learning from the Period for Inquiry-Based Cross-Disciplinary Study in high school to the liberal arts program in university will positively influence the Japanese educational system. It is expected to positively affect students’ development as well if they are able to utilize the outcomes of their high school studies and learn about continuing themes as part of their university education.

2.4. Evaluation

Evaluating social justice education through relative assessment by conducting paper tests, as is traditionally done in Japanese high schools and universities, is not appropriate. While achievement and rubric assessments are possible, we believe that portfolio assessment is the most appropriate means of assessing comprehensive learning. A portfolio-based evaluation is an “assessment based on the systematic collection of learner work (such as written assignments, drafts, artwork, and presentations) that represents competencies, exemplary work, or the learner’s developmental progress. [10]” In our proposed social justice education, students are expected to develop their interest in social justice and learn independently. In particular, students should be evaluated on the content of their discussions and presentations, as well as on their progress in written drafts.

2.5. Educational Resources

The overcrowded curriculum in high school education has exhausted the teaching staff. Since our proposed social justice education includes theoretical, abstract, and specialized content, high school teachers may be burdened with an even heavier workload. Therefore, high schools and universities should collaborate on educational resources as well. In this regard, employing university-affiliated teachers or part-time lecturers should also help revitalize high school education. It could also help address the issue of post-doctoral students’ employment. In this high school-university collaboration, we believe that university faculty members and high school faculty members can mutually share educational activities to compensate for the shortage of human resources.

3. Details of the Social Justice Education Curriculum

3.1. Foundational Theory of Ethics and Social Justice

The introduction to the curriculum should position the concept of justice in ethics and trace its evolution through the history of philosophy and ethics from ancient to modern times. Through this, students can acquire a foundational knowledge of the concept of justice.

First, social justice education is introduced through Rawls’ description of the priority of the right over the good [11], and students are encouraged to distinguish between the right and the good theories in ethics. Building on the discussion about the priority of the positive over the good, the concept of justice in ethics is positioned through a discussion of the principle of harm to others as a minimum rule and the distinction between law and morality/ethics.

Next, an overview of theories of justice from ancient Greece to modern times provides knowledge about the history of theories of justice and situates the concept within the history of philosophy. In The Republic, Plato ascribes an elevated status to the virtue of justice among the four primary virtues [12]. Furthermore, in Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle makes a distinction between distributive and corrective justice [13]. Each of these can be enhanced through active learning that exposes students to the original text.

The third issue is justice in the deontological theory of duty, with a focus on Kant’s theory of obligation. In Kant’s view, a just act accepts the demands of practical reason as obligatory and arises out of respect for it. A person’s autonomy and freedom exist when they obey the moral law according to the dictates of reason, without being influenced by any other heteronomous factors, including those inherent in us, such as emotions and desires [14].
The fourth issue is justice in utilitarianism. In this regard, understanding Bentham’s dictum “everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one” [15] is necessary as a fundamental principle and the foundational idea of utilitarianism—that maximizing the total well-being of those involved is a policy decision that serves justice. Utilitarianism is the first political theory to be referenced and plays a central role in public health policies to improve social welfare. Students should be familiar with the importance of utilitarianism in public health ethics and discuss its strengths—it is a theory that treats each person equally and promotes the well-being of society as a whole—and its weaknesses—consequences sometimes differ from ethical intuitions.

Social justice theory should include John Rawls’ theory of justice. Students should develop an understanding of the two principles of disparity from Rawls’ critique of utilitarianism. By doing so, students will be able to find the connection between the theories of justice up to and including modern theories of justice and gain a comprehensive historical understanding. Utilitarianism focuses on maximizing social utility and is indifferent to how resources should be distributed. Rawls assumes that people in society have different life plans and views of happiness (conception of the good), and he constructs a principle for the correct distribution of the things that are necessary for each person to lead a social life, including freedom, income, and social status. He proposes the two principles of justice as the principles that free and rational people choose under the “veil of ignorance” in the “original position”. An understanding of the following two principles of justice is essential to a social justice curriculum:

First Principle: Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all.

Second Principle: Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, consistent with the just savings principle and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. [16]

This foundational knowledge will be critical as we examine, evaluate, and reflect on various policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.2. Social Justice Theories

As an essential part of the social justice educational curriculum, students need to study ethical and philosophical theories of social justice. This includes studying at least three approaches—the liberal egalitarian, communitarian, and the social structure approach—in detail.

The first is Rawls’ and Daniels’ liberal egalitarian approach, which focuses primarily on wealth redistribution. Daniels’ approach explains that social justice requires the correction of health disparities and involves intervention in SDOH. He argues that the principle of fair opportunity is a key element in Rawls’ two principles of justice and that ensuring people’s normal functioning is essential for this. “Normal functioning” means that healthcare preserves people’s ability to participate in their society’s political, social, and economic life. It sustains them as fully participating citizens in all spheres of social life [17]. Therefore, to ensure people’s equal opportunity, preventing disability and disease by improving public education, social security, and social welfare is essential. Based on recent socio-epidemiological studies, he also points out that health is affected by access to health care and is significantly influenced by the social distribution of income and SDOH. He argues that improving health disparities also requires reducing socioeconomic inequality. The high mortality rate among African Americans during the pandemic—despite the appropriate allocation of medical resources—indicates the need to address inequalities in income distribution and education to correct health disparities.

Social distancing policies as a countermeasure to the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated the situation of many socially vulnerable people. A particular problem in Japan has been the support for independent restaurants. For restaurant employees and managers—
who already face a precarious situation due to fierce competition—the restrictions imposed by social distancing policies were a direct threat to their livelihood. Moreover, the government’s support for them has been slow in Japan. The right amount of support at the right time is necessary for those who are disadvantaged by public health policies.

The second is the communitarian approach, centered on Sandel and others. Sandel’s approach explains that social justice requires citizens’ solidarity. According to him, a just society requires citizens to think together about the meaning of the good life and create a public culture that accepts the moral and religious disagreements that are inevitable in a pluralistic society [18]. Citizens’ moral and political responsibilities in a just society include the duties of solidarity and loyalty, historical memory, and faith. Modern liberalism—which envisions free and independent individuals and a value-neutral state—is not suited to a just society [18]. He also states that a just society requires a strong sense of community and fostering of a civic morality among citizens that includes concern for the whole and dedication to the common good [18]. In other words, Sandel argues that a just society is created when citizens actively engage in public deliberative discussion about the common good in a community connected to their own identity. The problems of socioeconomic disparity and racism in the United States today have increased the division and inequality among many citizens. It undermines the sense of national solidarity and belonging and erodes the civic morality necessary for social justice. To break this negative cycle, raising citizens’ sense of belonging and restoring solidarity are vital. Simultaneously, we must draw attention to the criticism that Sandel’s approach views the obligation of solidarity and loyalty as a moral obligation for citizens, which can lead to coercion and intolerance in society [18]. However, overcoming these criticisms is possible by combining multiple approaches. Our society is pluralistic, and agreeing on a single morality and religion will be difficult. However, if public engagement in moral disagreement becomes more active, we can strengthen the basis for mutual respect. It seems possible to learn from and foster civic morality through repeated and contentious public debate, in which citizens also participate [18].

COVID-19 destroyed existing social connections. For example, one of the problems in Japan was the disintegration of local communities in which the older population is at the center of the community. COVID-19 led to the isolation of the older population, who are rooted in their local communities without facilities such as Internet connections that can facilitate virtual communication. From a communitarian perspective, attempts to strengthen social solidarity are an essential perspective for future infectious disease control.

The third is the social structure approach, centered on Young. Young’s approach explains that promoting social justice requires addressing oppression as a social structure. Young maintains that injustice includes oppression and domination beyond distributive injustice [19]. Oppression, which is structural, is not just the result of governmental choices or policies. Oppression refers to the enormous and profound injustices perpetrated by dominant groups through their responses to the structural features of everyday interactions, such as media and cultural stereotypes. Thus, it perpetuates the unconscious assumptions among well-meaning people in the dominant group in everyday life [19]. Young identifies five faces of such oppression—Exploitation, Marginalization, Powerlessness, Cultural Imperialism, and Violence [19]. For example, the high mortality rate of minority groups in pandemics may at least be related to “Cultural Imperialism” and “Powerlessness". They may mistrust medical care owing to their experiences of “Cultural Imperialism” because of their stereotyped identity (uninsured, poor, and so forth). Moreover, they may be hesitant to receive medical care because of previous disrespect by medical professionals and the oppression of continued experiences of “powerlessness”. These may negatively impact their mortality rates. The problem with such oppression is that the dominant group is frequently unaware of its existence. Therefore, social justice needs to address such oppression, not the disappearance of differences [19]. However, Young’s approach to justice is criticized for being deeply embedded in the social structure, meaning that even if we could identify the oppression, it may be challenging to address it. Indeed, the dominant group members are
unaware of oppression and unconsciously biased, so it may be challenging to provide a quick-fix solution. However, that does not mean that we can do nothing or do not need to manage it. By speaking out about oppression, we can make its presence known, even if only gradually, and this can lead to significant change. This is evident in the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty of the wicked, but the silence of the good” [20].

3.3. Psychology and Behavioral Economics

Three findings from socio-scientific empirical studies may contribute to promoting social justice—the social intuitionism model, the implicit association test, and nudges. Learning about these and understanding the social science approach to social justice contributes to solving the practical challenges. Humans who have experienced COVID-19 must grow up to be more resilient against infectious diseases. The development of public health policies that consider human cognitive tendencies and the physical limitations of cognition will be a vital requirement for new infectious disease control measures that are anticipated.

Previous research on public policy or health has demonstrated that people following their moral intuitions often have nonprofitable consequences. Haidt said that most human moral judgments are driven by quick moral intuition, and we use slow post hoc moral reasoning only when necessary. This system is called the social intuitionist model [21], and he mentions that intuitive moral judgment is unreliable. Therefore, he argues that a proper understanding of the intuitive basis for moral judgments can help decision-makers avoid errors and educators design programs to improve the quality of moral judgments and actions [21]). Haidt suggests teaching specific skills to enable people to use moral reasoning and intuition together more effectively. An example is the reasoned judgment link, in which people may at times reason their way to a judgment by sheer force of logic, overriding their initial intuition. Additionally, the private reflection link explains how a person may spontaneously activate a new intuition that contradicts the initial intuitive judgment and use multiple competing intuitions to respond effectively to a situation.

Second, the implicit association test (IAT)—developed to explore the roots of thoughts and feelings of which we are not conscious—may contribute to social justice. The preferences revealed by IAT are based on both our preferences and what we have learned about what is considered “good” in the larger cultural world, for example, media, community, and family values [22]. These attitudes and stereotypes can negatively impact our understanding, behavior, and decision-making and may influence a person’s unconscious discrimination. Understanding such implicit bias is essential in understanding disparities in so many aspects of society, such as health care, police, education, and organizational practices, such as hiring and promotion.

Finally, recent behavioral and socioeconomic empirical research has led Thaler and Sunstein to propose the nudge concept. Past research has shown that the rationality of many judgments and decisions that humans make is flawed [23]. Nudge refers to interventions by seemingly trivial factors that alter decisions that would not have been made if one had been fully alert and informed [23]. These interventions do not prohibit individual choices or significantly alter economic incentives. The nudge concept is a type of libertarian paternalism, unlike traditional paternalism, which preserves personal freedom of choice [23]. Avoiding intervention may, therefore, be easy and inexpensive; nudge could, for example, contribute to encouraging citizens’ political participation in the interests of social justice.

3.4. Advocacy

Fostering the capacity and sentiment to advocate for the socially vulnerable is essential in social justice education. To improve advocacy skills, fostering experiences of communication with socially vulnerable people, emotional connections, and a sense of solidarity with people living in the same community is essential. To this end, creating
practical opportunities for students to communicate with socially vulnerable people in the social justice education curriculum is necessary.

Socially vulnerable populations vary with each of their societies. A social justice education curriculum must include a balanced blend of global and local perspectives. From a global perspective, the issue of international disparities in well-being, or poverty, is a critical social justice issue and must not be avoided [24]. Furthermore, if we target locally vulnerable populations—which can be a common problem in any society—racism and xenophobia, the older population, the disabled, and women and gender may be curriculum themes. Discrimination against people of color is by no means an American issue alone. Discrimination also exists within Asia. Although foreigners living in Japan are guaranteed basic rights, many experience discrimination. The older generation and people with disabilities are also typically vulnerable populations. Students need to experience firsthand how difficult it is to live in society as an elderly person or as a person with disabilities. In addition, Japan still lacks a strong understanding of LGBTQ people, and laws to protect LGBTQ populations remain inadequate due to various forms of opposition. Women, and sexual minorities in general, are socially vulnerable.

4. Significance of Education and Points to Consider in Curriculum Development

Many socio-epidemiological studies have demonstrated that enhanced citizenship education can lead to equal opportunities for people and improve health disparities. It can also empower marginalized people. Providing citizenship education would reinforce a sense of belonging to a common community. We need to educate students from multiple backgrounds in the same curriculum, thereby promoting pluralistic discussions. In addition, we may be able to use IATs and other methods to raise awareness of Young’s oppression and develop consciousness of implicit bias. Introducing the skills that Haidt suggests would also be helpful for effective collaboration between intuition and reasoning for moral judgments into the curriculum.

This proposal has some limitations. First, our proposed curriculum is only one example. We have designed a curriculum that targets high school and liberal arts students in Japan, given the current state of education in the country. However, each country may develop a curriculum for social justice education that is appropriate for its context. We suggest including representatives of marginalized people in formulating such policies for public education and public educational facilities. For example, if policymakers develop policies based solely on cost-effectiveness without listening to local people’s voices, these formulated policies may lead to injustice because many policymakers are members of the dominant group and may be unaware of existing disparities and discrimination. The local government must always involve community representatives and listen to their needs to avoid this. Additionally, using Young’s lens of oppression would also be essential to check for the presence of invisible bias in the policies thus created.

The concept of justice is internationally diverse. In this study, we have analyzed it in the Western philosophical tradition, which has some degree of reputation as the greatest common denominator, to make the curriculum accessible to people of many countries. However, adding to this curriculum opportunities for learning about social justice concepts that reflect the culture of each country would be beneficial. For example, in Japan, the word “giri” is often used to refer to a morally good way of being. It is composed of the words “gi”, which means “righteousness”, and “ri,” which means “reason”. It has similarities with the concept of “justice”, which is expressed as “righteousness”. In a narrower sense, this concept of “giri” means that in relationships between people, one should not only pursue one’s gain but also respond to favors received from others without losing sight of them. Interpreting “justice” in the context of the Japanese concept of “giri”, the word “justice” in Japanese society has the connotation of an altruistic act without regard to personal gain. Thus, extracting “social justice” in the context of each country’s culture, adding it to the social justice education curriculum presented in this paper, and studying it from the perspective of improving community cohesion are crucial.
5. Conclusions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the socially vulnerable were placed in an even more difficult position. We argue that high school and college liberal arts education on social justice is needed to address the possible emerging and re-emerging infectious disease pandemics. We propose a desirable educational curriculum to actualize this. A curriculum on social justice aims to help students to understand the value of social justice, recognize inequality and disparity in society, and acquire the ability to address the widening social gap and inequality. To this end, the course is designed to provide students with the opportunity to gain knowledge of the ethical status of justice and the history and details of justice theories, as well as to gain exposure to vulnerable populations’ voices by listening to their perspectives and discussing their ideas about justice. Practical training is needed to foster advocacy skills for vulnerable populations through discussions based on students’ ideas about justice.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.O.-H., E.N.; writing—original draft preparation, R.O.-H., E.N.; writing—review and editing, R.O.-H., E.N., A.A.; project administration, A.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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