



# Social Work Students' Perceptions of Peace and Social Justice

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The aim of the paper is to understand the perceptions and beliefs of Master of Social Work students towards the concepts social justice and peace. The paper explores: (i) various perspectives on how peace and social justice are perceived; (ii) implications for teaching peace and social justice in future social work studies; and (iii) the place of these in the content and methods of peace education, and practice approaches to social justice. The current exploratory study was conducted in four schools of social work in India. In two schools a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to the Master of Social Work students, while in the other two schools of social work responses were collected through focus groups discussions.

**Key words:** Social justice, Peace studies, Social work education, Social work curriculum

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## Introduction

The 2015 global peace index for measuring peace and its causes shows that violence alone costs 13.4% of the world's GDP, whereas the latest UNHCR estimation indicates that more than 50 million people are now either refugees or internally displaced because of conflict and violence. A comparison with the 2014 score shows that the 2015 score remains stable, but the situation gets worse when comparing with the 2008 peace index scores. This means that the incidences of terror attacks and violence are comparatively very high (Global Peace Index 2015).

The concept of social justice and peace relies on the following beliefs/principles: Dignity for human beings is the ethical foundation of a moral society. The development of every society or nation is measured on whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person. Social work is a profession which respects the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals irrespective of age, gender, nationality and socio-economic condition. The concept of social justice and its relevance and application within the present globalized world require a more detailed explanation because the notion of social justice is relatively new in the present context. The concept social justice first emerged in Western thought and political language in the wake of the industrial revolution and the parallel development of socialist doctrine. The development of social justice ideas was as an expression of protest against the exploitation of labour and a focus point to develop the human condition. The concept social justice was born as a revolutionary slogan underlying the ideals of progress and fraternity (UNDESA 2006).

The basic principle of the social work profession is to bring equality in human society. Hence social workers treat each person in a caring, respectful manner, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social work practice, according to the International Federation of Social Workers (Ifsworg, 2017). seeks to promote the responsiveness of organizations, communities and social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems. Social workers act to prevent and eliminate domination, exploitation, and discrimination against any person or group on any basis. The aim of the social work profession is to promote social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being by utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems; social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. Further, the core purposes of the social work profession explain the need for social work practice to address and challenge the barriers, inequalities and injustices that



exist in society; formulate and implement policies and programmes that enhance people's well-being; promote development and human rights; and promote collective social harmony and social stability, insofar as such stability does not violate human rights. However, the application of the concept social justice requires an understanding of the geographical, sociological, political and cultural framework within which relationships between individuals and groups can be understood, assessed, and characterized as just or unjust. In the present globalization context there is clearly a universal dimension to the concept social justice, with humanity as the common factor. "Slaves, exploited workers and oppressed women are above all victimized human beings whose location matters less than their circumstances" (UNDESA, 2006).

In contemporary society the concept social justice is understood as distributive justice. Many a time these terms are interchangeably used not only in local terminology but also in international relations. The concepts social justice and distributive justice are used as broad reference to "justice" in many international legal and quasi legal texts (UNDESA, 2006).

### **Need for Incorporating Social Justice and Peace in Social Work Curriculum**

Social work education is expected to help social work students to prepare for their social change role as the mission of social change is inherent in social work. However, unfortunately the involvement of social workers in various forms of macro-practice is limited (Gal & Weiss, 2000), and social work students are provided with few opportunities to gain practical experience in policy-practice and social action (Haynes & Mickelson, 2000, as cited in Kaufman, Huss, & Segal-Engelchin, 2011).

A small number of social work schools teach politically and socially critical views to the students (Mizrahi, 2001). There are very few social work courses which incorporate the concept social justice and peace in their curriculum. In fact, social work is a practical profession aimed at helping people to address their problems and matching them with the resources they need to lead healthy and productive lives. Beneath this practicality lies a strong value system that can be summarized in two words: social justice. Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities. Social workers aim to open the doors of access and opportunity for everyone, particularly those in greatest need (<https://www.socialworkers.org/>). A global perspective on the social work profession says that in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 ("9/11"); the study of peace with justice is increasingly significant for understanding and responding to the changes occurring in a world undergoing the processes of globalization (Berea College, 2014). Supporting the views that the concepts social justice and peace need to be incorporated into the social work curriculum, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action



affirm that “Human rights education should include peace, democracy, development and social justice, as set forth in international and regional human rights instruments, in order to achieve common understanding and awareness with a view to strengthening universal commitment to human rights” (UNOHCR, 1993, p. 80). “According to social work philosophy ... Peace is not possible where there are gross inequalities of money and power, whether between workers and managers, nations and nations or men and women” (NASW, 2015). Social workers have consistently advocated for a just and peaceful world. Social justice is central to the profession’s values and specifically emphasized in the NASW Code of Ethics as social work professionals are instructed to “promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people.” (NASW, 2008). Social workers promote peace and the general welfare of society from local to global levels (NASW, 2015). As the NASW Code of Ethics for the social work profession describes, social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers’ social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice (NASW, 2008).

### **Review of Literature**

A number of studies (cited below) have addressed the need for and importance of the concepts social justice and peace in social work education. These studies have been undertaken in many different places, including the UK, USA, Australia, India, and Europe. Violence in its numerous forms, at all levels of the social order, is a major dilemma. For nearly five decades, educators concerned with this problem have argued that education has an accountability to address the related issues through education in the school system, in the training of teachers, and in development of pedagogies which are related to the goals of peace (Mishra, 2011). Over the past few decades, practitioners and theoreticians in the fields of conflict resolution, conflict transformation, education, and service-learning have begun using the term social justice education in increased numbers (Adams et al., 2010; Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Cipolle, 2010; Enns & Sinacore, 2005; Furlong & Cartmel, 2009; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2011; Zajda, 2010; Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). For renowned Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire, education is the key to enacting social justice (Freire, 2006). Freire contends that education provides venues for students to achieve freedom, both intellectual and physical—the “indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (Freire, 2006). For many people peace is mere absence of war and conflict, but the concept of peace in a society goes beyond this understanding where peace is not simply the absence of war; rather it is also the presence of justice and equality that ensures that the



basic necessities of life are met. The process of peace building in a society involves the elimination of violence, oppression, greed and environmental destruction by the constructive mediation of conflicts. The Clark University Student handbook on peace studies describes the peace building process as:

At this time in history, we live in a rather violent culture. However, we can imagine a peaceful world and work towards building a global community with a culture of peace. Although studying peace involves values and may seem idealistic, resolving conflict is a very practical matter. Individuals who effectively deal with conflict are in high demand in business, government, and nongovernmental organizations. (Clark University, 2012)

Peace education is dealing with the conflict and conflict-affecting situations in society.

Conflicts occur on many different levels: personal, in communities and organizations, within societies, and between states. The study of peace invites students to address the challenge of bringing constructive change out of the conflict rather than violence. It also allows them to explore and participate in actions that provide hope for positive social change. By their involvement, students will gain awareness of the ways in which humanity can and must find alternative non-violent means to resolve conflict through education, research, planning and action. (Clark University, 2012)

The factors involved in the generation, persistence, and resolution of conflict suggest that peace building requires an understanding of four different methods of conflict resolution or skill sets. These are governance, negotiation, nonviolent struggle, and personal transformation (Clark University, 2012). Hence these factors need to be considered when constructing a social work curriculum. As Mishra (2011) says, "Peace education is more effective and meaningful when adopted according to the social and cultural context and the needs of a country". The training and education in peace should be enriched by the nation's cultural and spiritual values together with the universal human values which are globally acceptable. The educators or the teachers need to be prepared to teach peace education and issues that are often uncomfortable in the present world; then only can the concept of peace education become a regular inclusion in curriculum within the schools of nations and worldwide.



Student exchange programmes may contribute to building peace as they can build bridges that span the potential chasms of cultural differences (Lin & Brantmeier, 2008). When students are sent on exchange programmes that brings changes in the classroom and school which will help students to transform deeply rooted perspectives and provide hope (Rajakumar et al., 2006). Peace, as an integrative perspective for the school curriculum, is an idea whose time has come. Education for peace, as distinguished from peace education, acknowledges the goal of promoting a culture of peace as the purpose shaping the enterprise of education. If implemented with vigour and vision, education for peace can make learning a joyful and meaningful experience. Perhaps 'peace' is like 'happiness', 'justice', 'health' and other human ideals, something every person and culture claims to desire and venerate, but which few if any achieve, at least on an enduring basis (Webel, 2007). For Johnson and Johnson (2011) "peace education is aimed at teaching individuals the information, attitudes, values, and behavioural competencies needed to resolve conflicts without violence and to build and maintain mutually beneficial, harmonious relationships". Further they state that lasting peace may depend on educating future generations into the competencies, perspectives, attitudes, values, and behavioural patterns that will enable them to build and maintain peace. The National Council for Education Research and Training's revised National Curriculum Framework (NCF), In India includes guidelines for introducing peace education into the school system, whereas the University Grants Commission (2001) model curriculum on social work education has some guidelines for introducing peace contents into the social work curriculum. Students need to be educated regarding restoring peace and social justice. Rajagopalan (2009) points out that "peace education is the learning of skills and building of attitudes that support the development of a peace-seeking mindset". Sensitivity to diversity and a focus on inclusion are values promoted by peace education. Further she states that Peace education is often described as a valuable tool for resolving issues and repairing the damage done to a society by war or conflicts. At the same time peace education is perceived as a process to prevent conflict. If peace education is to be one of the building blocks of a civil society, it must focus on more than the negative. If the idea of peace is to precede the idea of war then it has to be nurtured from the very birth of independent thought (Rajagopalan, 2009).

### **Objectives of the Study**

Our objectives were:

- To study the various perspectives on how peace and social justice are perceived;



- To study implications for teaching peace and social justice in future studies of social work; and
- To study the place in the content and methods of peace education, practice approaches to social justice.

### **Research Methods**

The aim of the study was to understand the perceptions and beliefs of Master of Social Work students towards the concepts social justice and peace. In view of the limited literature available on this topic and its exploratory nature, the qualitative research method supplemented with quantitative method was chosen because it enables the researcher to understand the perception of student social workers (Creswell, 2008). A grounded theory approach was used to enable researchers to generate concepts to understand the perception of social work students (Charmaz, 2006).

### ***Participants***

The participants of the study were from four schools of social work in India. In two schools of social work a semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect the responses of social work students. The questionnaire focused on three domain areas spread over the themes: (i) various perspectives on how peace and social justice are perceived; (ii) implications for teaching peace and social justice in future social work study; and (iii) the place in the content and method of peace education, and practice approaches to social justice.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected through focus group discussions in October 2015 by the second author of this paper. The research design was reviewed by the heads of four schools of social work; thereafter their consent was obtained to conduct research and voluntary consent procedures for recruiting the students were drafted. The formal letter explaining the purpose of the study was distributed to potential participants in all the four schools of social work. The first activity in this research project was to undertake a survey of preliminary understanding of the subject matter of the study, namely peace. Questions with four possible responses were canvassed initially in all the four schools of social work. The second stage was to undertake a further conversation through a focus group discussion of 45 minutes, predetermined to accommodate up to 10 participants, with the second year social work master's students.

### ***Data Analysis***



The raw transcripts of the focus groups that were prepared in the native language Kannada prevalent in the research area were read to the group to ensure accuracy of the process in statements. Coding of the transcripts was undertaken through key words, phrases, sentences and segments of text. Saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the data was undertaken to exhaustively deal with the emerging themes. Select but representative quotes corresponding to the evolved themes were translated from Kannada to English.

### **Results**

The themes identified in the transcripts of the focus groups are presented in the following. The responses of students from each school of social work are presented under separate themes, because such a presentation provides a clear picture of the perception of the students towards the concepts peace and social justice and their exposure to the concept in teaching and learning methods including the contents of the course curriculum.

#### ***Reflection on the Meaning of Social Justice***

In one school of social work students were asked to define the peace and social justice concepts. The responses varied from student to student. One student defined social justice as:

Nothing but equal opportunity for all...the people get social justice when they are not discriminated by others on the basis of caste, gender, religion and economic status.

With respect to an equal society the same student had the opinion:

Equal society means equal opportunity for all and a society which ensures the minimum opportunity for all the members. An equal society is one where there is no gender bias and gender discrimination.

Student 2 expressed her views on the concept social justice as...

Social justice is equal opportunity for all the people in the society including the weaker sections of the society... it is as simple as access to justice for all the people without any discrimination.

Further the students expressed their views that in today's society social justice is a concept which is available only to the well-off families and to economically strong people. Discrimination and



injustice is practised in every walk of life and discrimination on the basis of gender, caste and economic condition is still present in Indian society. In relation to this one student explained:

We cannot find equality anywhere in the society despite the rules that equality be given to women in every aspect. But today's society is male-dominated and whatever the mistakes done by the men are always neglected... [The respondent quoted the Delhi Nirbhaya rape case incident to support the statement.]

Another student had the same view:

No equal opportunity is given to the women, all the people talk about women empowerment and no one cares for the women empowerment. All the programmes and policies are becoming a concept in the text books and in lessons...If we really want to empower women that must start from home...the concept of treating a boy and a girl with respect to rights and freedom in the family should change.

### ***Reflection on the Meaning of Peace***

The responses of students when they were asked to define peace were quite interesting as none of the students had a clear understanding of the concept peace and its relevance in the social work discipline.

One student had the view:

For me peace means every people and every family under one god.... and every country and every nation under one roof... like that the universe becomes as there are 192 countries which are working for peace only, but in reality peace should come from home. Because the family is the primary unit of society and we have to start the peace-building process from the micro level, that is, family.

The meaning of peace changed for another student:

For me peace is a healthy environment with the absence of violence, disturbances and people having a healthy life style.

The student 3:



In society we are not tied by anyone and we are living according to our wish and we are not getting dominated by other people.

***What a peaceful society looks like:***

A society where there is no violation and everything happens in a very orderly manner, that society is considered as a very peaceful society...

Another student slightly varied in her opinion:

In a peaceful society there should not be any crimes; there should not be any strikes, Hartals [strikes] and violence.

***How can a peaceful society be established?***

One student had the view:

In order to establish a peaceful society we need to educate the people... we need to educate the people regarding the constitutional provisions and the attitudinal changes among the people should be initiated.

Another student slightly differed in his views:

Before educating the people we must impose penalty to the people who are creating problems or who are violating the rules.

The overall opinion of the students in both the schools of social work was that:

In order to establish a peaceful society we need to stop teaching religion in the schools and colleges, we should not include the contents of any religion in the texts. Further the educational institutions having religious affiliation should not be permitted to continue in educational service.

***Reflection on the Curriculum***

The students were asked to comment on their present curriculum and its content. The objective was to know the integration of the contemporary social problems in the social work curriculum



which were interconnected to the concepts peace and social justice. The students were also given a chance to express their views on what contents they thought should be incorporated in the social work curriculum. The responses differed from student to student.

Student 1:

Family development is the one major component we need to concentrate on as the knowledge of peace and social justice comes basically from one's family.

Student 2:

... Need to incorporate the concepts related to ill-effects of substance abuse to the youth as many family conflicts are the effect of the substance dependency of one or other family member. A careful examination is also required to incorporate the issues related to youth substance dependency as the numbers of incidences are increasing day by day.

Student 3:

Social work is the scientific study of the society. It is based on scientific knowledge... for giving solutions to social problems we need to study social research, the content related to research and new paradigms in social work research are needed to be in the place of old existing ones.

Another student added to this view:

Proper guidance is lacking in the practical knowledge of methods of practising social work, such as case work, group work and community work.... we were given only community work and we were not given any aspects on case work and group work for the practicals. The case work and group work were completely theory papers.

An overall response of the students was:

In our curriculum we are focusing more on theory aspects and neglecting the field work practice... to understand the society and to respond to social problems we need to know the happenings in the communities which demand the visits to the



communities and study and understanding of the communities... in total more focus needs to be given to the practical component in the social work curriculum which is missing in the present days.

### ***Incidents Disturbing Peaceful Conditions in the Country***

The students reflected:

The incidents happening in the present days like rape, violation of human rights and religious riots. The political condition of the country is contributing a major part to all these incidences and also the present society is facing the problems of poverty unemployment and over-population. The regional imbalances and regional conflicts as well as religious issues are affecting the society in a very bad manner. Most of the time conflicts between two religions lead to an unhealthy environment in the country.

### ***Summary***

Table 1 shows the different perspectives of social work students related to peace education, and social justice. It also describes teaching peace and social justice concepts in social work and students' interest to take up peace education in future studies. For 57.5% of the respondents the words 'social justice' and 'distributive justice' are one and the same, whereas 15% responded that the meaning and the implication of the words 'social justice' and 'distributive justice' are different. The majority (52%) of the respondents supported the views that understanding other cultures will help to understand the concept social justice; whereas only 10% of the respondents agreed that the present curriculum of their school included concepts of peace and social justice. Forty per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that the concepts related to social justice and peace needed to be more focused in the social work curriculum, whereas 62% of respondents agreed that the absence of academic collaboration between the disciplines is the real challenge for peace building.

Table 1. Students' perspectives on peace and social justice

		Strongly agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Total
<b>Perspectives on peace and justice</b>	Meaning of social justice and distributive justice	20.0	57.5	7.5	15.0	100.0
	Violation of human rights	50.0	40.0	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Culture will help to understand the concept of social justice	52.5	42.5	0.0	5.0	100.0
<b>Teaching peace and justice</b>	Peace education must start from family	60.0	27.5	10.0	2.5	100.0
	Justice and peace contents need to more focused in social work education	40.0	52.5	2.5	5.0	100.0
	Curriculum need to include economic concept to deal with inequality	30.0	32.5	20.0	17.5	100.0
	Religion should not be taught in schools and colleges	55.0	30.0	15.0	0.0	100.0
<b>Practice approach to social justice</b>	Social work curriculum in my institution includes relevant contents of peace and social justice	10.0	7.5	37.5	45.0	100.0
	Absence of academic collaboration between the disciplines is the real challenge for peace building	27.5	62.5	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Peace education should be provided as a part of social work education	47.5	47.5	5.0	0.0	100.0

## Discussion

This study indicates that social work students' understanding of the concepts social justice and peace are very poor. The reason may be that the curriculum of many schools of social work does not include a chapter or content related to social justice and peace-related issues. As expressed by the respondents:

...in our entire two years' course hardly we had one or two hours of teaching related to social problems and social justice. The content of peace is not directly incorporated into the curriculum and in a way we are uneducated in this aspect. Bringing equality and thereby establishing peace and balance in society is possible only when the people are educated and aware about their rights and duties.



This statement is inconsistent with renowned Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire's statement education is the key to enacting social justice (Freire, 2006). Peace, as an integrative perspective for the school curriculum, is also reported elsewhere (Mishra, 2011; Rajakumar et al., 2006). Looking at the content of the curriculum of the course they were currently pursuing, the majority of the respondents felt that religion in the curriculum is a reason for injustice in society. Hence religion should not be taught in the social work curriculum in particular and the school curriculum in general. But many schools of social work may not teach religion in their curriculum as the curriculum is guided by the UGC model curriculum framework which (UGC, 2001), whereas curriculum at the school level is guided by the framework developed by NCERT. One respondent was of the opinion that the content of the social work curriculum must include values education, cultural education, moral education, conflict resolution techniques and policies and programmes by the government for the betterment of vulnerable groups in the society. This statement holds true with Montiel (2003); a clearer understanding of violence and peace issues needs the understanding of chronic poverty, cultural fabric of violence and peace, active nonviolent political transformations (Steger, 2001). The conceptual understanding of chronic poverty and the cultural fabric of violence and peace is also reported elsewhere (Pedersen, 2001; Schwebel & Christie, 2001).

Our findings show that schools of social work should concentrate on reformulating the elective papers and specialization papers in order to attract more students towards each of the options. It is clear that the number of students is concentrated in only some specialities or optional papers; as one student explained, "We have a specialization optional paper during our third semester. The paper is titled as criminology and correctional setting, but none of us choose that optional paper because we are not interested to go for the correctional setting."

To the question "Do you feel that social work should think of starting a completely new specialization dedicated for peace and social justice studies?" a student responded:

We don't want peace social work as a separate specialization in social work, but we need content related to peace and social justice to be extensively incorporated in the existing curriculum and not only the social work course – all the other courses also need to look at incorporating these contents in order to make a change in the society.

### **Limitations and Direction of Future Research**

The limitations of this study need to be addressed. First, only four schools of social work were included in the study and the schools of social work were selected purposively. Out of the four one school had specialized social work training ranging from Family and Child welfare, to Human



Resource Management, Social Development and Medical and Psychiatric social work, while the other three schools had a generic social work curriculum. Hence the understanding of the students may differ because of the course content.

Secondly, this study was conducted only in the social work students' community which brings only the students' perceptions about the issue and not those of the educators. Future studies with educators should be conducted as their perceptions shape the perceptions of students.

Thirdly, the present study was focused only on Master of Social Work students. Hence the findings reflect only on Master of Social Work course curriculum and its contents. Future studies on the same issues should be conducted with other course levels.

Fourthly, the present study was conducted in the one particular geographical area with socio-political and cultural similarity. The concepts of peace and social justice are closely related to one's socio, political and economic aspects. Hence future studies should be conducted in other societies with cultural, political and economic variations to understand the differences and the influences of these factors.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions of Master of Social Work students on peace and social justice. The results show that students are not adequately taught about the concepts of social justice and peace in their course curriculum. These concepts should not be overlapped in the curriculum of the helping profession and adequate teaching methods should be employed to enable students to understand the concepts. By taking these findings seriously, considerable headway can be made in supporting the views of incorporating peace and social justice contents into social work curriculum in India.

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