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## Teaching For Social Justice: Teachers Inquire Into Their Practice

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*Socially critical action research in education is informed by the principle of social justice...It is not simply a matter of challenging the system, but of seeking to understand what makes the system be the way it is, and challenging that, while remaining conscious that one's own sense of justice and equality is itself open to question. —Tripp, 1990: 161*

Over the years, each of us has been engaged in various teaching and research projects that focus on social justice concerns. Teaching with social justice at its heart highlights the importance of the teacher's role in imagining and working towards a more equitable society. We began to talk about (to echo Tripp) our "own sense of justice and equality" some years ago. The occasion for our conversation was the desire to start a cohort-based teacher education program that centred on teaching for social justice. Our dreams came to fruition when we helped to found the Humanities and Social Justice Teacher Education Program (HSJTEP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 1998. While we learned a lot in the process and have enjoyed working with student teachers, we wondered how more experienced teachers, who were already well established in their schools, would translate a concern for social justice into their practices.

Therefore, when an opportunity to develop a teacher inquiry course arose in the Urban Learner program, we eagerly seized upon it. The magistral-level Urban Learner program is cohort-based and designed for experienced teachers, many of who teach in inner-city schools. We assumed (correctly, as it turned out) that teachers confronted with the daily realities of poverty, racial discrimination, and lack of support for children and caregivers for whom English is an additional language would resonate to a thematic focus on teaching for social justice. This focus was broad enough to encompass a wide variety of concerns arising from teachers' own practices, and led to the various inquiry projects included in this issue. We hope that these stories from the field will instruct and inspire both new and experienced teachers. We believe that teacher inquiry plays an important role in teachers' professional development and provides an important avenue for teachers to develop "some understanding, influence over, and responsibility for the social conditions and outcomes of education" (Tripp, 1990: 165).

### Democratic Citizenship and Anti-Oppressive Education

Teaching for democratic citizenship is a key element of teaching for social justice. Living in a democracy calls for civic responsibilities and, in particular, active interest and involvement in the community. Teachers play a crucial role in preparing students to take on these responsibilities. Teaching for democratic citizenship focuses on democracy as a moral way of life (Henderson, 1999). Teaching for democratic citizenship emphasizes inquiry, choice, and action (Kincheloe, 1999) as teachers and students pose questions; make meaning of curriculum, school, and society; and confront social problems.

Understanding and attempting to address societal inequities make up the second element of teaching for social justice, anti-oppression education. Anti-oppression education highlights diversity in schools and society and proposes ways of using the multiple perspectives brought forward by the diverse student population as an integral part of teaching. Teachers, therefore, need to foster "productive dialogues about the inequities and the possibilities for social reconstructions in the communities within which [teachers] and their students are developing" (Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002: 2).

Teachers cannot fix the problems of society by "teaching better," nor can teachers alone, whether through individual or group efforts, alter the life chances of the children they teach, particularly if the larger issues of structural and institutional racism and inequity are not addressed.

However, while teachers cannot substitute for social movements aimed at

the transformation of society's fundamental inequities, their work has the potential to contribute to those movements in essential ways. —Cochran-Smith, 1999:116.

Among the key roles teachers can play in addressing inequities is inquiring into their own practice and its context within the educational system. Teachers have a particular responsibility for understanding the role schools play in perpetuating economic and cultural dominance.

Overly narrow (e.g., Eurocentric) curricula and various other institutional practices—standardized testing, ability grouping and tracking, in-grade retention, repeated failure, suspension, expulsion—selectively discourage, stigmatize, and exclude young people from school. Both inside and outside of schools, societal inequalities based on class, race, gender, sexuality, and ability place further limits on “actually existing democracy.” —Fraser, 1997 & Kelly, 2003.

### **Teaching for Social Justice and Teacher Inquiry**

When teachers inquire into their practice, they often make decisions about teaching and learning as they develop knowledge (Cole & Knowles, 2000: 2). They reflect, theorize, and examine their theories continuously as a part of teaching (Schon, 1983). Teacher researchers make this process of inquiry more systematic and often public. When teachers engage in inquiry about their practice, they do so from the “inside,” using their own sites as the focus for their study (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 1994: 2). They pose a question, systematically collect data about the question, analyze the data, draw conclusions, and report on them publicly. This process of researching their practice provides teachers with the distance necessary for an investigation, as they make the familiar unfamiliar so that they can examine and analyze it. We believe that teacher inquiry, informed by a concern for social justice, should be oriented towards reflective action and positive change in the classroom, the school, or the community.

Teachers who conduct research in their classrooms need to ask questions about the status quo and uncover their own beliefs, assumptions, and biases. They should be willing to critically examine their practice as well as the practices of their school. Teacher inquiry has the potential to help students learn better (Patterson & Shannon, 1993) as well as “reform classroom practice by prompting powerful intellectual critique of assumptions, goals and strategies” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993: 35). This kind of inquiry is less daunting when done in collaboration with like-minded teachers (Wolk, 1998: 13).

### **Our Project: Teachers Inquiry and Teaching for Social Justice**

The reports in this volume are empirical studies that include collection, analysis and interpretation of data that focus on particular classrooms and schools. Twenty-one teachers, most of whom teach in elementary inner-city schools, undertook a year-long course, entitled “Teaching for Social Justice: Teacher Inquiry,” that we had team-taught as a part of the Masters of Education program (Urban Learner II cohort) at the University of British Columbia. The teachers came to our course with varying experiences and interests in teaching for social justice. One had been a member of the B.C. Teachers' Federation's Social Justice Committee, others had engaged in activism through other venues, while still others had thought about the issues raised in the course in less formal and systematic ways.

Together, we examined various social justice frameworks and the complexities of translating them into educational practices. We identified and reflected on various inequities (e.g. sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, and poverty) that operate within classrooms and schools. We also analyzed the multiple traditions of practitioner research in the field of education, and the teachers who participated in the course were invited to learn the rudiments of critical teacher inquiry, including: developing a research question, conducting a literature review, submitting an Application for Ethical Review at UBC, exploring methods for conducting a small-scale inquiry, and analyzing and sharing the results of such an inquiry. Thus, as a part of the course, the teacher researchers investigated and reflected upon their practices, and some considered action to mitigate inequities, being careful to document their results.

The teachers spent considerable time selecting topics and questions for inquiry. Knowing the sustained effort that would be required for this undertaking, we urged them to select personally meaningful projects. We encouraged the teachers to reflect on their own backgrounds, particularly as these connected to their views of diversity and teaching for social justice (some of these reflections ended up in the final project write-ups; see, e.g., Beale; Eng; and Stirk).

Adapting advice from Sleeter (1996), we also asked the teachers to include writings by, or interviews with, scholars or other experts who were members of the marginalized groups that figured into their research topics. For example, for those whose topic or research context involved Aboriginal students or parents, we suggested that they consult articles published in such journals as the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* or the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*.

All told, the participants in our course worked on fifteen projects, and ten are published in this volume. The teacher researchers used a variety of methods in their inquiry projects: observation, questionnaires, analyses of students' work, photography, and interviews. To varying degrees, all the projects can be seen as contributing to anti-oppression education, teaching for democratic citizenship, or both.

According to political philosopher Iris Marion Young:

Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes, which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people's ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen. (1990: 38)

She discerns five major forms of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Taken as a whole, the ten projects presented here can be seen as attempts to counter at least four of these forms of oppression: marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

### ***Marginalization***

In various ways, all the contributors whose projects are featured speak to the value of including all students in class activities. Each teacher researcher identifies and reflects on various inequities that negatively affect classrooms and schools: sexism (Beale; Eng; Hait; Pinsonneault & Malhi); heterosexism (Beale); poverty and unequal access to resources (Costa; Hait; McIsaac; Stirk); racism (Beale; Pinsonneault & Malhi; Stirk; Teeuwsen); ableism (Beale; Hait; Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart); ageism (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Croll; Hait); and discrimination by language and immigration status (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Teeuwsen). Thus, they recognize that, historically, certain social groups have been excluded from "useful participation in social life" (Young, 1990: 53).

The majority of the students in Don Teeuwsen's class belonged to racial minority groups; yet they did not find many images of themselves reflected in the school and the wider society, a situation that Teeuwsen, citing bell hooks (1992), attributes to "white supremacist culture." In his project, Teeuwsen asked students to incorporate both writing about what they learned from their parents and "a teaching" their parents wanted to share into an artistic representation. He sought to fully include those students, for example, who spoke English as an additional language and were relative newcomers to Canada.

### ***Powerlessness***

Conventional schooling has been organized in ways that allow young people little say in what and how they learn or in shaping the rules that govern their behavior. Often, "they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them," and, given their position at the bottom of a hierarchy, they are allowed to "exercise little creativity or judgment in their work...and do not command respect" (Young, 1990: 56-57).

Darrin Clarke, Sibli Gill, Miranda Hounsell, and Bill Urquhart direct our attention to the missing voices of students in their research on cooperative learning. They believe that cooperative learning activities can shift the current hierarchical structure in most classrooms. "Cooperative activities give those students a chance to shine in a system that often legitimizes the best readers, writers, and athletes, but does not see the inherent value in asking our students to care for each other." Susan Croll's project investigates ways of empowering parents and students who often do not have a voice either in the assessment of

students' learning or in the attendant reporting procedures in school. Croll notes the injustice of conventional evaluation practices, which make the learner, and the learner's parents, passive recipients of the judgments of teachers as the sole experts.

Although in some contexts teachers may seem relatively powerful, in others they themselves are treated as having no expertise or authority. M. Costa notes that the "voice of teachers" was often "forgotten" in the debates over open-area school design in the 1970s. Her project provides teachers at an inner-city school the opportunity to weigh into this debate. As advocates for their students, the teachers she interviewed insisted on linking school design to the creation of "learning environments that can enliven and inspire students of all interests and abilities."

### ***Cultural Imperialism.***

Cultural imperialism involves "the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm," which has the result of rendering invisible the oppressed group's perspective, while simultaneously stereotyping that group as the Other (Young, 1990: 58-59). Shanda Stirk's project reminds us of the near cultural genocide of First Nations peoples in Canada. In interviews with First Nations parents, Stirk found that they identified racism as a key problem for their children in school. Aboriginal parents believed, for example, "others thought of them as the weakest culture," and they shared their ideas about how teachers might begin to challenge destructive, yet enduring, stereotypes.

The teacher researchers attempted to work against cultural imperialism when they interrupted the sexist, Eurocentric, socially dominant curriculum. Susan Pinsonneault and Kara Malhi analyzed the intersection of gender and "race"/culture in the ways their Grade 1 students responded to literature. Among other things, they found Indo-Canadian boys and girls both identified with an adventurous male character from India. In general, the girls in Pinsonneault's class were much more willing to identify with adventurous male or female characters, while boys preferred high-status male characters even when these characters were less adventurous. Their findings speak to the need for teachers to help students "read against the grain" (Davies, 1993). These two projects, Pinsonneault and Malhi's and Stirk's examine the ways in which simply teaching the canon negatively affected students from non-dominant groups.

Jason Eng, who explored the experiences of male elementary school teachers, discusses the contradictory results for these men of the harmful stereotyping of women as "good with children" and "more patient than men" (and, we might add of gay men teachers as "promiscuous" or "pedophiles"). In order to overcome this harmful stereotyping, Eng hints at the need for men to develop "new masculinities" (Bradley, 1993: 25).

### ***Violence***

"Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person" (Young, 1990: 61). Sadly, adults consciously and unconsciously pass along attitudes that help sustain this systemic violence, which then manifests itself among children. Ursula Beale's project was motivated by her observation that children seize on differences and attempt to hurt each other by insulting each other's families. Beale developed a unit on family diversity that prompted students to consider such issues as the stereotyping of same-sex families. She asked students to reflect on the possible connection between valuing differences and curbing schoolyard bullying.

### ***Teaching for democratic citizenship***

Each of the projects highlighted can be seen as contributing to anti-oppression education. Some can also be seen as underscoring the importance of democratic citizenship when teaching for social justice. The teacher researchers who focus on cooperative learning, for example, critique the individualistic competition that characterizes traditional classrooms and other institutions in our society. Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, and Urquhart argue that each student in the class has significant contributions to make, and this is important for all students to learn. Helen Hait focuses on the challenges teachers face when they teach about social responsibility in a democratic society. She argues that teachers ought to prepare students to be active citizens in a society that values diversity. Hait illustrates how teaching the skills of cooperative learning, cultivating communication across differences, and solving group problems are crucial to building a democratic and "peaceful classroom."

As a group or individually, the projects in this collection illustrate the principles of practice that Marilyn Cochran-Smith identifies as central to teaching for social justice (1999: 118-119): teachers need to enable students to learn within communities (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Hait; McIsaac; Teeuwsen); teachers build on what students bring to school (Stirk; Teeuwsen); teachers focus on teaching skills (Clarke, Gill, Hounsell, & Urquhart; Hait; Pinsonneault & Malhi; Stirk); teachers work with communities and families (Beale; Croll; Stirk; Teeuwsen); and teachers diversify assessment (Croll). We consider these projects as first steps in research and in teaching for social justice. Although at this point most projects did not “make activism, power and inequity explicit in the curriculum” Cochran-Smith’s sixth principle of practice when teaching for social justice (1999: 119), we hope action, in varying degrees and forms will be the next step for the teacher researchers.

***“The richest form of professional development”***

At the end of the second year, as the teacher researchers reflected on their learning, they discussed what they had gained from doing research in their own classrooms and schools. Croll highlighted the importance of inquiry that relates directly to practice: “I benefited immensely from conducting action research, if for no other reason than because the research I did was directly connected to my practice as a teacher.” Teeuwsen felt a “heightened sense of purpose and significance, more clarity about the intention” in his teaching practice. The teacher researchers suggested that they became more aware of their own perceptions and biases and how those affected their practice. Stirk suggested that research made her “examine...[her] own perceptions and teaching practices, and helped [her] identify how to effect change in [her] own small place.” Pinsonneault summarized the impact of such inquiry on her practice: “Doing action research in my classroom raised my awareness of gender issues. As a result, I see gender biases in the words and actions that play out in my classroom more clearly now.”

Teeuwsen highlighted how paying attention to the familiar in his classroom and learning to detach himself as he collected the data made him more aware of what was happening in the classroom. “There seemed to be much more I was seeing and hearing.”

Others, such as Pinsonneault, discussed their analysis:

Being able to listen to the tapes of student discussions afterward also allowed me to analyze the group dynamics in my class. It was only then that I realized how much discussion time the three most vocal boys claimed, and how they repeatedly dominated class discussions.

After this process of analysis, Pinsonneault shared her findings with her primary students and took action that changed her practice:

One day I presented the class with some of the results of our survey. I cut a 100 cm strip of paper in segments to represent the percentage of comments made by each of the three vocal boys, the remainder of the boys, and all of the girls. The class was quite shocked with the visual image. Afterwards I took steps to ensure that all students had a share of time to speak during discussions.

Reflection, inquiry, and action are interrelated and emphasized differently in the reporting of each project. One teacher researcher emphasized the unique features of the context; another questioned formation and data collection; while yet another focused on the reflections and implications for further action. Some had to learn how to manage their time in order to be able to teach, observe, and record data for their study. Beale discusses the challenges as well as the benefits of doing research in her classroom:

Doing research in my own classroom required enormous energy, concentration, and focus. The constantly changing classroom situation from day to day asks for extreme flexibility. However, the challenge of exploring and honing research questions became stimulating and left me with more energy than I thought possible.

Pinsonneault summarizes the way in which the research made her more aware of, and ultimately changed, her practice as she focused on creating a socially just classroom:

Participating in action research in my classroom was the richest form of professional development that I have experienced so far in my teaching career. It has given me the opportunity and time to examine, study, and

reflect upon my own teaching practices. Investigating these teaching practices has shed light on aspects of my teaching that I took for granted, bringing them more fully into my consciousness. Because I participated in action research, I realize more fully how important it is to make a deliberate effort to create a more equitable environment for all students.

Although all the teacher researchers indicated that they had learned from doing research in their classes and schools, they also faced a number of challenges as they investigated their practice with social justice in mind. Some, for example, faced resistance from parents, staff members, and others from administration and the school board.

In one particular project, the teacher researcher, Scott McIsaac, and his Grade 7 students examined the links between a healthy learning environment and school design. They compared the green space and play areas in their own school, located in a low-income neighbourhood, with others in high-income areas, carefully documenting their observations and calculations. As students reflected on the apparent inequities, they related them to the socio-economic gap between the neighbourhoods.

At the outset of this project, however, the school board raised concerns about the initial plan to incorporate student protest. Moreover, the teacher researcher and we were determined not to leave students with a sense of hopelessness about their lived reality. McIsaac addressed these concerns by inviting students to develop and create replicas of their ideal schools. In retrospect, this encouraged students to respond to resource inequalities that they had documented with imagination, creativity, and hope.

Teacher inquiry that focuses on teaching for social justice often pushes the boundaries and challenges the status quo. Fear of consequences and self-censorship may sometimes limit teachers' visions of the possible. We invite teachers to continue to explore their practice and inquire into teaching for social justice. This issue illustrates the value of such work; the importance of collaborating with teachers who share similar concerns; and the worth of building coalitions with progressive teachers and administrators, caregivers, students, and community members.

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