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# A Mindfulness To Transcend Pre-Service Lip-Service

## A Call for K-12 Schools To Invest in Social Justice Education

Olivia Murray

Learning to consider the experiences and perspectives of those who are marginalized is difficult for members of a dominant group who have not encountered similar obstacles. According to Sonia Nieto (2000) and the National Center for Education Information (2005), student populations continue to be characterized by diversity while more than ninety percent of those in teacher preparation programs are mostly White, middle class, and from non-urban backgrounds. Comprehending this paradox is important for members of the teaching community to confront the deep social and psychological influences of the –isms that affect society and schools.

In her book, *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit (1995) criticizes the deficits of teacher education programs that avoid and repress the multicultural voices found in American classrooms today. I support her argument to reform teacher preparation programs, but for the purpose of this article I will explore the responsibility of individual schools that presently ignore and deny the multicultural facets of a typically diverse classroom. In doing so, I plan to expose three main features of promoting social justice that I suggest individual schools be held accountable for in order to move toward the full inclusion of all learners and foster a democratic learning environment of informed and respectful young citizens.

The conceptual framework for my argument is supported by Iris Young's (1990) definition of social justice education that challenges students to examine the inequalities that people experience as a result of their social group memberships, through systems of constraint and advantage reproduced through the social processes of exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and

violence. The three-fold approach I suggest schools adopt includes an on-going dialogue among staff that helps see beyond one's own perspective, creating a school-wide team that is committed to educating others about relevant issues of equity and social justice, and fostering an intimate relationship with the school community.

Many teachers, including myself, enter the teaching profession ill-equipped and unprepared to internalize and teach social justice. Novice educators often possess good intentions, but as Delpit points out in her probe of the salient issues of diversity and schooling, "For many who consider themselves a member of liberal or radical camps, acknowledging personal power and admitting participation in the culture of power is distinctly uncomfortable" (p. 26).

As a result, all over the nation future teachers in higher education likely endure one required course in isolation that focuses on multicultural issues in education within other classes that honor a conceptual framework of the dominant culture at the expense of understanding the language and learning of diverse perspectives which are sure to be represented in classrooms they will teach. This cyclical and obsolete approach to teacher education perpetuates the system of social oppression and creates classroom dynamics that cause educators and students alike to fail miserably.

Consider, for instance, the plethora of new graduates that enter the educational arena holding relatively high levels of privilege (i.e., White, educated, middle class, heterosexual, Christian Americans). I think these teachers quickly begin to acknowledge that there is a communication barrier, a disconnection between themselves and children who are outside and my even defy the dominant culture. But by the time they reach this realization these teachers have lost their status as a trainee and feel pressure to demonstrate infallible expertise. No longer experiencing the support of professors, supervisors,

and the social network of a cohort, I think many initial teachers deny or ignore this dilemma for fear of surrendering teacher competency.

### Seeking To Inform Social Justice

So how can schools employ approaches to social justice education that encourage educators and learners in both the advantaged and target groups to dismantle oppression and create a more socially just future? At a time when school budgets are deteriorating and creative tendencies are replaced with a need to prepare students for high stakes standardized assessment, taking on the bodies of knowledge, research, and practice that inform social justice education is not an easy task.

Thus, school administration and educators committed to teaching social justice must naturally take on a leadership role in order to confront the challenges that come with this work. The first element to emerge in owning and implementing social justice curriculum and practice is the ability to make time for, and endure, moments of discomfort. Initially, this occurs when members of the school create a forum to confront their own prejudices and biases based on life experience.

Engaging in open discourse as such is often difficult because each individual holds a unique identity that is layered and complex and held parallel to varied experiences of privilege and oppression. Some people are acutely aware of the social power dynamics and focus on actions to eliminate oppression while others feel threatened by their membership within privileged social groups and avoid uncomfortable conversations that may arouse feelings of guilt and an overwhelming sense of responsibility. Evasion can be intentionally executed at a conscious level, but it is often more subtle, as articulated by Delpit, who writes, "We all interpret behaviors, information, and situations through our own cultural lenses;

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these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness making it seem that our own view is simply the way it is" (p. 151).

### School-Wide Discourse

Human tendency to place significant value on personal views, as described by Delpit, emphasizes the need for educators to develop awareness of their perspectives and engineer how they can be enlarged to avoid bias. School-wide discourse must focus on questions concerning how instructional practice, curricular decisions, materials, and classroom routines connect to children's family, community, and cultural roots. When schools provide time for educators to engage in these courageous conversations they can begin to discover how their school supports or undermines equity and how they influence the social identity development of their learners.

Assumptions about heterosexual-ity, for example, often regulate the social norms and language of a school with regard to topics of family, love, attraction, and sexual and emotional relationships. Largely ignoring homosexual culture, many learning institutions across the country regress further to remain tolerant of verbal harassment (i.e., pejorative jokes and gay and lesbian epithets) and physical abuse (e.g., pushing, kicking) directed at students who are, or perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). Nationwide research indicates that five to six percent of the nation's youth identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Bochenek, M., Brown, A. W., & Human Rights Watch, 2001). Considering the inclusivity of LGBT parents and siblings, as many as nine students in a classroom of 30 are affected by homosexuality (AFSC Gay/Lesbian Youth Program, as cited in Fontaine, 1998).

Often remaining blindfolded and mute on the subject, schools face a unique opportunity to recognize and transform the oppressive features of heterosexism found in classrooms today. In order to do this, educators must first examine their own attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and confront the overt and subdued prejudice that accompanies institutionalized homophobia. From here, teachers can brainstorm ways of supporting LGBT students and families and infuse this aspect of social justice in their curricula and teaching to distill stereotypes and false images of gay and lesbian persons and influence healthy perceptions about sexual orientation, gender expression,

and diverse constructs of social identity in general. When individuals within schools contemplate these issues of power and take responsibility for teaching social justice, the result is an arena for transformative learning and action.

### Developing Equity Teams

A second school-wide approach enabling educators to communicate meaning across marginalized lines, and thereby address issues of social justice, is to create a school-wide Equity Leadership Team (ELT). The specific projects employed by such a team should not be universally prescribed for they must correlate with the unique needs of a given school. However, one broad recommendation is to analyze school data evaluating whether academic achievement, school dropout rates, and disciplinary referrals are disproportionately represented by certain demographic groups.

Consider the following example of an ELT formed within the Beaverton School District, located just outside Portland, Oregon. The team meets once per month and constantly dissects district and school-wide data to identify student needs, design interventions, and monitor progress in achieving equity. Utilizing a lateral leadership model, the team analyzes demographics, perceptions, student learning, and school processes to eliminate the persistent patterns of differences in student achievement and experience by race, ethnicity, language, economics, ability, sexual orientation, and gender.

In 2005 the team disaggregated current data and presented their findings at a district leadership conference for school administrators. Among other despairing realities, the team explained that while the Hispanic population only makes up 13.5% of the total student population, they account for 33% of the overall dropout rate. Similar citations showed unequal representation of social groups within attendance, academic achievement, and behavioral referrals (Shigeoka, 2005). After reviewing data, administrators and ELT members collaborated to discuss the expectation levels of students and assess their role as leaders in promoting collaboration among staff to ensure equity and social justice education.

An equity team can also explore the relevance and respect for different cultures represented in the curriculum by asking questions such as how does the content and access to textbooks and library resources affect marginalized students? It is equally

important to review teaching practice and assessment in order to facilitate conversations with staff regarding the possibility and harm of perpetuating stereotypes, failing to meet the needs of particular groups of students, and any other findings that emerge from the data?

When asked by an ELT member about curriculum and classroom experience, a student at Westview High School in Beaverton, Oregon shared, "One of my friends is Native Hawaiian, and she was so p---ed when she found out that all she learned in her social studies class about Hawaii was how great America was to make Hawaii another state. They never taught us about it from the perspective of Native Hawaiians. I didn't know anything about it until she told me what happened from her perspective. I felt cheated" (Shigeoka, p. 16).

ELTs can also assist schools in transforming invisible biases into lucid and transparent entities. Encouraging staff and students to recognize, for example, the unconscious attitude and practice of hegemonic Christianity which forces all Americans to adhere to a calendar that observes religious holidays and honors Sunday worship broadens ones critical perspective and challenges analytical thinking. Many schools begin the day reciting the pledge of allegiance, commence athletic events and public assemblies with prayer, and house textbooks saturated with a Christian perspective.

It is important to acknowledge the historical and contemporary role of religion in society, but diverse perspectives of faith, practice, and beliefs must also be recognized and validated. Teachers must understand the scope and depth of religious communication and conflict and teach using a language, practice, and resources that reflect diverse perspectives.

Analyzing data and classroom curricula and practice through a critical lens reminds schools and teachers to constantly examine the messages they communicate to their students and families and to refine a sense of their own efficacy in promoting social justice. ELTs can assist schools in maintaining self-awareness among teachers and preparing the critical thinkers of our future.

### Relationship with Community

Finally, building and sustaining an honest and genuine relationship with the community that surrounds the school (parents, families, businesses, neighboring schools, etc.) is vital to assisting educators

in the promotion of social justice values. The driving force of Delpit's argument is that the power imbalances resulting from historical racial, ethnic, class, and gender conflicts can influence the quality and quantity of learning and teaching that occurs in schools. Delpit (1995) suggests that "Appropriate education for poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with other adults who share their culture" (p. 45).

In a thoughtful and measured way, Delpit explains how students, teachers, and parents from disenfranchised groups are instrumental in developing various means of challenging dominant-group raids into their ways of being and knowing. She also provides ample evidence of the ways in which dominant-group school personnel, policies, and practices misinterpret this knowledge base. Educators belonging to privileged groups in society that truly believe in social justice will acknowledge this oppressive structure and thoughtfully establish a relationship with, and seek guidance from, students, teachers, and parents from disenfranchised groups to ensure that equitable transformations occur.

In addition to agreeing on a formalized plan for general two-way communication with families, some ways of initiating this desired relationship include inviting parents and community members into the school, conducting home visits, planning public curriculum meetings, placing extreme importance on parent/family conferences and communication, and actively advocating for family involvement in the classrooms.

Strategically encouraging parental and community involvement in schools and working to strengthen bridges of communication transmits a shared appreciation and collective investment among all stakeholders. To foster relationships with families and community members who better understand the cultural experience of diverse learners couples with on-going

social justice discourse and the creation of an ELT to confront the historical and contemporary influences of social identity and oppression.

### Tools for Change

Indeed, our nation faces a difficult conundrum centered on the fact that we continue to produce learners characterized by rich diversity in concert with a mass manufacturing of teacher graduates representative of the dominant culture. The three-step approach offered in this article does not pretend to provide a comprehensive solution to combat this deep and systemic barrier to learning. Rather, to legitimately solve this dilemma national educational reform is necessary. Legal policies that guide current practice need to be shifted, teacher education programs must be restructured to ensure that diverse populations are represented, and social justice must be valued and infused throughout curricula.

What the three-step approach presented here does offer, however, are tools for individual schools to implement in order to reject current practices of avoiding the topic of social justice and instead too explicitly address issues that frame the lived experience of their learners. Because as we teach across the margins of race, class, gender, or other -isms we must recognize and overcome the disequilibrium of power, the stereotypes and other barriers which prevent us from seeing each other.

These efforts must drive our teacher education, our curriculum development, our instructional strategies, and every other aspect of the educational enterprise. This is an enterprise that begins with our own unique and typically biased experiences as school children, morphs into an encounter with teacher education programs, and as I argue, should then extend beyond preparation-orientated courses to include thoughtful and honest social justice work within individual school communities.

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