

Deepening Social Justice Teaching

by Christine E. Sleeter, California State University Monterey Bay

The term “social justice” is so widely used that I have become concerned it may lose its meaning. Most people agree on its broad principles, such as these: “1) Equity, the principle of fairness. . . 2) Activism, the principle of agency. . . [and] 3) Social literacy, the principle of relevance” (Ayres, et al., 2009, p. xiv). This is all well and good, but what might these broad principles mean for teaching, and particularly for teaching literacy? To bring some clarity to the term, I synthesized various frameworks for social justice education (Carlisle et al. 2006; Chubbuck 2010; Cochran-Smith 2004; Dover 2009; Gorski 2013; Jones & Vagle 2013) into four dimensions.

1. Situate Families and Communities within an Analysis of Structural Inequities

I believe it is crucial to begin understanding social justice by grappling with the big picture. According to Chubbuck (2010), as teachers try to understand students who struggle in their classrooms, especially students from families in poverty, most focus on what the student does not know. That focus usually leads to deficit thinking about the student. Some teachers generalize beyond the student’s specific area of struggle to her overall ability to learn, often drawing on common stereotypes about families, such as not valuing education, not using language well, or not parenting effectively. Yet, the same teacher may bring social justice-oriented literature or projects into the classroom without realizing she or he is doing so on a foundation that presumes inequities.

A structural analysis, in contrast, situates students and families within multiple inequitable social, economic, and power relations that limit access to societal resources such as health care, jobs that pay a living wage, and healthy living and work environments, and to school-related resources such as preschool, well-funded and adequately resourced schools, and culturally relevant curricula. Social justice means rejecting interpreting problems of people of color and/or from low-income communities mainly as personal failures, and instead, interpreting their problems as effects of unfair policies and systems. The tasks, then, become identifying and challenging barriers both within and outside the school and classroom, recognizing the resilience and knowledge students bring, and becoming allies rather than antagonists of these students’ families. These tasks interact with the second dimension of social justice education.

2. Develop Relationships of Reciprocity with Students, Families, and Communities

Becoming a social justice ally requires developing reciprocal relationships with students and families, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. Developing reciprocity with people we have learned to dismiss is a sea change. Poor relationships between educators and high-poverty communities are commonly taken as normal. Professionally trained educators often believe our knowledge is superior to what students' families know, a belief that leads to various practices that undermine reciprocity, such as talking down to parents, expecting parents to meet teachers in the school without expecting teachers to meet parents in the community, and encouraging young people to use education to escape their communities.

Cochran-Smith (2004) defines reciprocal relationships as “working with (not against) individuals, families, and communities” (p. 72). Gorski (2013) recommends starting with relationships of trust and reciprocity with students, recognizing that students from marginalized communities have often learned that teachers are not necessarily trustworthy. Teachers who listen to students' concerns and take their concerns seriously will begin to earn their trust. In addition, I encourage teachers to identify community-based organizations they might collaborate with to address school issues or develop projects. For example, years ago in collaboration with the local Urban League, my students and I produced a booklet about African Americans in math and science for local educational use. This exciting project grew from an idea the Urban League director had, but without student help, could not bring to fruition.

3. Teach to High Academic Expectations by Building on Students' Culture, Language, Experience, and Identity

A great deal has been written about social justice education as including high academic expectations built on a foundation of intellectual resources students bring. At the same time, standardization of curricula and pedagogy direct attention away from culturally responsive, student-centered approaches to teaching. For example, Crocco and Costigan (2007) found New York City teachers frustrated with a shrinking amount of time to forge relationships with students, and pressure to adhere closely to a mandated curriculum and organize their teaching in prescribed ways. The result for students from poor backgrounds was routinized drill over curriculum students often found irrelevant and boring; their disengagement then reinforced deficit thinking about their intellectual abilities.

Teaching for social justice pushes against well-institutionalized practices that thwart the academic engagement and achievement of students from marginalized backgrounds. For example, *Math in a Cultural Context* (<http://www.uaf.edu/mcc/>) grew from collaboration between Alaska Yup'ik Native elders, teachers, and math educators to develop a math curriculum

supplement that would engage Native students. The curriculum weaves together Yup'ik culture and knowledge with mathematics as outlined in the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards, such as in the module “Parkas and Patterns” that works with geometric patterns. Students in classrooms using the MCC curriculum like math and learn it better than students in classrooms not using it (Kisker, et al., 2012).

4. Create and Teach an Inclusive Curriculum that Integrates Marginalized Perspectives and Explicitly Addresses Issues of Inequity and Power

Teaching for social justice means developing democratic activism: preparing young people to analyze and challenge forms of discrimination that they, their families, and others face, on behalf of equity for everyone. Carlisle et al. (2006) call this work “direct social justice action and intervention,” in which curriculum “teaches an understanding of the nature and manifestations of all forms of social oppression; provides strategies for intervening in oppressive situations; and seeks to facilitate a living and learning environment for the development of liberatory thinking and action” (p. 61).

An excellent example is the work of The Chicago Grassroots Curriculum Task Force (<http://grassrootscurriculum.org/>) that involves teachers, students, and community people in creating curriculum. Its first toolkit entitled *A People's History of Chicago: Our Stories of Change and Struggle* rests on critical pedagogy, youth participatory action research, cultural relevance and critical multiculturalism. Its primary purpose is to empower Chicago's young people of color and/or from poor communities – academically, personally, and politically -- by engaging them in developing a politically sophisticated analysis of Chicago, and by learning to use academic skills to speak up for and work on behalf of their communities specifically, and social justice more broadly. You can listen here (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUmnAZmLmZI>) to what students have to say about it.

What about teachers in communities they regard as homogeneous or as privileged? Is social justice teaching relevant there? Yes, it is, and it begins with the same principles. No community that I have ever seen is completely homogeneous, egalitarian and supportive of the diverse people who live there. For example, one college where I taught years ago was located in a predominantly White, rural small town. Gender turned out to be a significant issue, as my students and I began to question institutionalized gender stereotypes we saw playing out in classrooms. We also began to problematize the segregation of students with disabilities into separate spaces for education.

You can begin by asking: What are the main local issues, who is in a relatively powerless position to address them, and how might you establish a relationship with that group of people? For example, university students in the Social Action Writing Program at California State University Monterey Bay worked with women on welfare. After listening to their stories, the students created the book *Education as Emancipation* (<http://www.amazon.com/Education-Emancipation-Women-Welfare-Speak/dp/BO03ALGG7W>) to educate others about the struggles, dreams, and needs of this disenfranchised group within their community.

I hope these examples might prompt work that deepens social justice teaching. A place to start is to identify who we normally collaborate with, and who we tend to ignore or dismiss and why, and to ask how unjust relationships of power play out locally, impacting differentially on diverse communities. Even better, bring these questions into the classroom, then consider how literacy teaching might support the work that emerges from the students.

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