

Engagement and Social Justice and Institutional Change: Promises and Paradoxes

by
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Introduction

In this article, I draw upon narrative and self-study or storied research as I document the experiences that have informed and guided my work. Using the lenses of self-study and narration offers me a means for understanding and communicating about who I am as a person, my work, the values and beliefs that undergird my work, the impact of my practice, and those I encounter in the process. As McEwan and Egan (1995) noted, narration is “essential to the purpose of communicating who we are, what we do, how we feel, and why we ought to follow some course of action rather than another” (p. xiii). Self-study is a research approach within the field of qualitative research methodology and its goal is the integrating of reflection as a tool to view practices from varying perspectives. Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) define self-study as:

The study of one’s self, one’s actions, one’s ideas, as well as the not self. It [can be] autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political and it draws on one’s life. Self study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people, and ideas considered. These are investigated for their connections with and relationships to practice as a teacher educator. (p.236)

The purpose of this article is to illuminate for myself and others the phenomenon of conscientization (Freire, 1973) that engenders engagement in social

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justice and activist work for institutional and social change. Through the years several developing scholars, especially doctoral candidates, have contacted me to request my participation in their studies about studying and understanding the work that I do as a critical educator of social justice. In my conversations and interviews with them, they have asked: What lived experiences shaped you and engendered your motivation and determination to engage in social justice and activist work? How did you grow into the discourse and praxis of social justice? What does it mean to teach for social justice and what does it look like in your teaching? What have you learned about doing social justice work? My goal is to inspire and empower those who choose to teach for social change and work to make the world more humane and just. I hope to reach out to emerging scholars who are searching for meaning and understanding of what it means to teach for social justice and work toward institutional and social change. My desire is to leave the reader with a sense of joy, optimism, and transformation as well as an understanding of the complexities that engagement in teaching for social justice and activism entails. I hope this article will contribute to the literature on critical pedagogy that engenders transformative intellectualism and change agency (Greene, 1998; Kincheloe, 2003; McLaren, 1998).

My Path to Critical Education

Let me provide at the outset a context that illuminates my interest and journey toward becoming a critical educator of social justice and change. I was born and raised in Nigeria. I lived and taught there before emigrating to the United States. Growing up in a patriarchal society, I was socialized into a cultural paradigm that ascribed power to males and where females were subordinated and viewed as second-class citizens. I became aware of the cultural paradigm, ideologies, oppression, inequities, and injustices embedded in my culture.

My introduction to social justice and activism occurred when I was in the sixth grade. My older brother and I were in sixth grade together, finishing up our elementary education. We had successfully completed both written examinations and oral interviews for admission to boarding secondary schools (7th through 12th grade). However, while my country provided a free Universal Primary Education (UPE), secondary education was not free. The tuition for secondary education was expensive, especially for families whose livelihood depended on subsistence farming or petty trading. My father was a police officer and my mother was a petty trader. Evidently, my parents' meager income was insufficient to pay for both my brother's and my tuition. Therefore, my father and the extended family decided that only one of us would attend secondary school. Because of the preference for male children in my culture, my brother was the obvious choice, even though I had outperformed him academically. I was told to pursue a vocational skill, to become a seamstress like most of the females in my extended family. I

had big dreams of going to college, to pursue a profession in my homeland, so this preferential decision was very painful for me.

In retrospect, I see that this experience contributed to my awareness of injustice and inequity. I felt that my gender had been used to deny me a chance for an education and a better life. I felt oppressed and I resisted that oppression the best way I could: I cried, refused to eat, and became rebellious. However, my “uneducated” mother stood up for me and made sure that I realized my dream.

Although my mother had not received a formal western education, she understood the value of education and wanted me to have what she was denied. I successfully completed my secondary and college education and had the privilege to come to the United States, where I have accomplished more than I ever imagined. So while this experience exposed me to the harsh realities of injustice, inequity, and privilege, I also learned about social activism and making a difference. My mother’s advocacy and action modeled for me the power of one to effect change. This experience reminds me of Carolyn Clark’s (1993) statement that nearly everyone experiences transformational learning through events that “changed our life.” As she states:

In all cases, we can look back on these or similar marker experiences and identify the effects that they have had on our development, on who we are as human beings. They have changed us. Before the experience we were one sort of person, but after we were another. (pp. 47–48)

Today I am a teacher educator. My focus includes teacher preparation, diversity, multicultural education, global education, urban education, and educational equity and social justice. Through engagement in these activities I have had the privilege of acting on my sense of agency that my mother modeled for me—teaching for social change.

Teaching for Social Change

I have taught in predominantly White institutions located both in rural and urban communities. For the past seventeen years, I have worked with pre-service and in-service teachers who fit the national profile described in the literature—predominantly White, middle-class, suburban, rural, female, conservative, and often culturally and racially encapsulated (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden., 2003; Ukpokodu, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As a critical multicultural and social justice educator, my goal and commitment is to foster teachers’ conscientization (Freire, 1973), transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), and change agency (Giroux, 1988). Given the reality that teaching in contemporary U.S. schools is increasingly becoming a cross-cultural phenomenon, my commitment is to prepare teachers who will be both multicultural persons, practitioners and change agents. Thus, my teaching aims at assisting preservice and inservice teachers to interrogate the notions of being, culturelessness, and meritocracy, and to move them toward de-

veloping critical consciousness needed for dismantling the status quo and engagement in transformative practice and change agency.

Most pre-service and in-service teachers I have encountered often express the notion of culturelessness (that they do not have a culture or that culture does not matter) and the belief that the American society and its educational system are just and equitable for all. Most have had limited experience with diverse “others” and so harbor preconceived notions that impact their effectiveness with diverse students. Multicultural scholarship is replete with studies on the negative and racialized dispositions of a majority of pre-service and in-service teachers toward diversity and diverse students (Brown, 2004; Terrace and Mark, 2000; Ukpokodu, 2004), and their engagement in pedagogy of poverty (Haberman, 1995). Further, most have been socialized to view teaching as an exclusive technical activity.

Joe Kincheloe (1993) indicted teacher education programs for preparing teachers as technicians who develop technical competence and a behavioral attitude of conformity to existing school structure, and so lack the sense of empowerment and agency to challenge the status quo. Given the systemic inequities that are embedded in educational and institutional policies and practices that deny quality and equitable education to diverse students and those with different sexual and family orientations and abilities, today’s teachers must be prepared for a commitment toward teaching for change. As a teacher educator working in an urban university, social justice is a cornerstone of my practice.

Scholars of critical pedagogy indicate that the fundamental charter of critical educators is to empower the powerless and transform those conditions which perpetuate human injustice and inequity (Freire, 1973; Greene, 1998; McLaren, 1988). Generally, my thinking about teaching for social change has been informed by John Dewey’s (1916) theorizing of education, democracy and meaning-making; Paulo Freire’s (1973) conscientization; Maxine Greene’s (1998) teaching to arouse a consciousness of membership in a society of unfulfilled promises; Sonia Nieto’s (2004) sociopolitical context of schooling and teaching; Henry Giroux’s (1988) transformative intellectualism and change agency; Jeanne Oakes’s (1995) teaching to change the world; Mezirow’s (2000) transformative learning, and Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s (1993) cognitive decolonization and peaceful engagement in critical dialogue. Similarly, I have been impressed by the practices of classroom teachers who have bridged the gap between theory and practice in social justice teaching especially Bill Bigelow, Bob Peterson, Linda Christensen, and Eric Gutstein of *Rethinking Schools* (1995).

Social justice has become a popular concept in the academic community, especially in teacher education. It is a broad concept that can mean different things to different people. However, scholars within the field of social justice define it in terms of its educational and social reconstructionist goals. For example, it has been defined as a perspective that involves questioning and analyzing school practices and policies (Nieto, 2000); the values and politics that pervade education (Oakes, 1995); teaching consciously for social change (Ayers, 1998), social

empowerment and activism (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Sleeter, 1996), and culturally responsive pedagogy (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

I view teaching for social change as teaching for educational equity, social justice, and activism. I have come to understand social justice education as a concept, a process, a pedagogical and curricular framework, aimed at challenging hegemonic ideologies, and uncovering and confronting educational inequities. I have also come to define social justice pedagogy as a teaching perspective in which educators and students develop habits and minds of transformative intellectuals and change agents working to eliminate structures, policies, and practices that deny some students access to the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) needed to actualize their full humanity and social mobility. Consequently, classroom teachers must become “cultural brokers” and “workers” (Freire, 1998; Gay, 1993). Such educators are competent, socially just and politically conscious, capable and courageous to make personal and professional commitment to educating children who are underserved and poorly served (Nieto, 2000). As a teacher educator, teaching for social change means that I must prepare teachers who develop the habits and minds of transformative practice, and who understand teaching as a socio-cultural and political endeavor (Cochran-Smith, 2004; McLaren, 1998; Nieto, 2004) and change agency (Adams, Lee, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Ayers, 1998; Giroux, 1988). Lucas and Villegas (2002) illuminate this point:

Socio-cultural consciousness further entails an understanding that differences in social location are not neutral. In all social system, some positions are accorded greater status than others. With this status differentiation comes differential access to power. Because differences in access to power profoundly influence one’s experience in the world, prospective teachers need to comprehend how American society is stratified. For example, along racial, ethnic, social class, and gender lines. They also need to understand that social inequities are produced and perpetuated through systemic discrimination and justified through a societal ideology of merit, social mobility and individual responsibility. They need to critically examine the role that schools play in this reproduction and legitimization process. Schools purport to offer unlimited possibilities for social advancement, but they simultaneously maintain structures that severely limit the probability of advancement for those at the bottom of the social scale. (p. 22)

Nieto (2000) has put forth ways in which teacher educators can situate equity at the center of the teacher education program: (1) teacher educators take a stand on social justice and diversity issues; (2) social justice is ubiquitous in programs; (3) teaching as an ongoing process of transformation; (4) teacher educators challenge racism and biases, and (5) teacher educators develop a community of critical friends (Nieto, 2000, pp. 182-183). Similarly, Cochran-Smith (2004) identified six principles of social justice teaching, applicable to K-12 practice: (1) evidence of significant work within communities of learners; (2) building on students’ cultural knowledge; (3) teaching skills to bridge gaps; (4) working with student families and communities; (5) diversifying assessment, and (6) making equity, power, and

activism explicit in the curriculum. In my teaching for social justice I have been guided by five basic practices: (1) taking a bold stand on diversity and social justice; (2) fostering student transformative learning; (3) situating social justice front and center in course discourse; (4) humanizing teaching-learning context, and (5) engaging in pedagogy of high expectation.

Taking a Bold Stand

To teach for social change is to take a bold stand on social justice. I have developed programs and courses on multicultural education and social justice that are aimed at fostering transformative learning and change agency (Giroux, 1988). When I began teaching at a rural university, I taught courses on diversity and methods courses. In these courses I experienced a great deal of student resistance as I approached my teaching from a critical multicultural stance. Critical diversity was not embraced, let alone teaching for social change. It would be five years later that I would have the opportunity to engage in critical social justice work. I had moved to an urban university that shared a boundary with a large school district populated by students of color and low income. The school district had been stripped of its accreditation due to dismal test scores and graduation rates. I was concerned and questioned my institution's lack of responsiveness to the educational realities of the students and the school district. It did not take long for me to discover that even though my School of Education had social justice and democracy as core values in its conceptual framework, its conservative and assimilationist ideology (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Nieto, 2000) had shaped its program and rendered it unresponsive to diversity and social justice values. This gap created both a challenge and an opportunity for me.

As I reviewed the program, I discovered that it lacked courses that prepare teachers for diversity and social justice. My first action involved proposing graduate programs with a multicultural emphasis. For two years, I battled with faculty who opposed the programs. I remember the despair and agony I felt when I found myself alone in a faculty meeting where the proposal was to be voted on, as one faculty opposed the proposal and none of my colleagues in my division could speak in support of the proposal. It was voted down. It would be several months of frustration, persistence, and persuasion before it was approved. I developed and continue to teach the program's core and required courses, such as *Multicultural Perspectives in Education*, *Teaching Diverse Student Populations in Today's Classrooms*, *Teaching and Learning in Urban Classrooms*, and *Teaching for Equity and Social Justice*. Additionally, I have proposed and developed similar courses for the undergraduate teacher education. In these courses, pre-service and in-service teachers are challenged to explore the role education has played and continues to play in shaping society and contributing to educational inequalities. Students are challenged to comprehend and analyze their roles as teachers in a

multicultural democracy, and develop skills for self-critique and transformative practice.

Nieto (2003) explains that if meaningful change is to happen, it needs to transcend the individual teacher's level and to happen at the level of the entire school and community, particularly to affect the climate of the school in its policies, practices and structures. Consequently, as part of increasing our faculty knowledge base on diversity and urban education, I have served as the lens of diversity as we examined books such as Ruby Payne's *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1998), Gloria Ladson-Billings' *Beyond the Big House: African American Educators on Teacher Education* (2005) and Perry, Steele and Hilliard's *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students* (2003), among others.

I also serve as a member of the unit's change agency group or "critical friends" (Nieto, 2000), aimed at promoting a culture change and positive racial relations following a decade of racial tensions and divisiveness. It is composed of the dean, divisional chairpersons, two other faculty and me. Campus-wide, I have organized and facilitated the institutionalization of the Diversity Curriculum Infusion Program (DCIP)—a year-long program designed to assist faculty in developing the knowledge, skills and dispositions to engage in curriculum transformation and inclusive teaching. Since its inception in 2003, I have facilitated six cohorts with a total participation of one hundred and sixty-eight faculty from eighteen departments and units including the hard sciences. In 2005, I received the university's Diversity Leadership Award.

Fostering Transformative Learning

The need to prepare teachers who are conscientious and reflective of their beliefs and values, and to engage in "meaning making," is crucial to effective teaching in a multicultural democracy. Because I agree with Geneva Gay (1999) when she says, "No one should be allowed to graduate from a teacher education program or licensed to teach without being grounded how in the dynamics of cultural conditioning operates in teaching and learning" (p.344), I place strong emphasis on transformative learning. Given that teachers have been documented to harbor conservative and misguided views (Parajes, 1991; Ukpokodu, 2004), I create learning experiences that position students to engage in self-examination, reflection and systematic analysis of school structures, policies and practices. A required assignment in my courses is the pre/post-self-reflective narratives. This assignment requires students to reflect on their culture, the beliefs and values constructed from their cultural socialization, K-12 schooling experience with respect to quality and equity, cross-cultural/racial relationships and interactions, awareness and consciousness of personal biases, view of America as an equitable and just society including its educational system, and self-efficacy teaching for social justice and change agency. In these narratives, most students often write about their "perfect

academic walk” (good schools, good teachers, good grades, and participation in honors and advanced programs), and so view American society and its institutions as equitable and just. Most also express and reveal the belief in the ideology of meritocracy and work ethic (Oakes & Lipton, 2007). Additionally, a majority often view themselves as “cultureless” and oblivious to their White privilege (McIntosh, 1988) and unaware of issues of educational inequities, believing that everyone has received the same educational opportunities and quality of education as they did. Further, many either deny harboring personal biases (what King (1991) calls “dysconscious racism”) or minimize the seriousness of personal biases by saying, “We all have biases.”

As students begin the course and are exposed to controversial topics, they exhibit deep-seated biases. For instance, Darrow (pseudonym), a White middle-age, career-changing teacher in an alternative urban high school, who enrolled in my course *Teaching for Equity and Social Justice*, initially responded to a narrative prompt by saying that he did not have personal biases; however, as he discussed his view of American society and its educational system, he expressed disturbing and conservative comments about diversity, as well as a yearning for a return to the “good ole days.” As he wrote, “I came from a low-income home and I had to fight, scream and scratch my way out of that lifestyle and do better for myself. Why can’t these people that ‘sponge’ on others do the same?” Darrow’s biases became more evident as he discussed his reflection on the narrative and the insights he constructed from writing it:

As I reflect on the insights I constructed from writing this narrative, I have a lot of concerns about my attitudes and actions toward others. I am going to be frank and honest and speak from my gut. First of all, I have a negative attitude toward women. For one reason or another, I think that men are superior to women. I wonder where I got that idea. Secondly, I have a negative attitude toward the actions and beliefs of homosexuals. I do not condone people who promote homosexual lifestyles. My belief is that homosexuality is sexual (sic) deviant behavior. It is abnormal. Homosexuals need help just like any other type of sexual deviants. Thirdly, I have a negative belief in people or groups who want to disrupt the status quo. When it comes to immigrants who do not speak English, they need to learn English, so that they can fit into the American culture. Fourthly, I think we need to go back to what we were doing well in the 1960s. Our test scores were a lot better than they are now. Fifthly, I do not trust people who promote equity and social justice agendas; because I think these people have another agenda besides the one they are promoting. I do not want our country to become socialistic like ... European countries, so I think sometimes people use equity and social justice to get us to become more socialistic. Finally, I know that I am a privilege (sic) person in America because I am a White male. (Darrow, August, 2007)

Darrow’s comment is representative of the collective disposition of many pre-service and in-service teachers with deep-seated biases I have encountered, that warrant transforming if they are to serve students from diverse racial, cultural, ethnic, language, social, gender, and exceptional backgrounds effectively

and function as change agents. In cases like Darrow's, I often feel concerned and wonder how to engage students with opposite ideological positions to the one I employ in my teaching. How do I engage a student who blatantly expresses distrust for "people who promote equity and social justice agendas," which implies a distrust for me as the instructor of the course he was enrolled in? More importantly, Darrow's comment, and others like it, create a challenge for me as I organize and orchestrate my classroom. How do I create spaces in my classroom where students like Darrow are encouraged to explore their views and yet not see my course and me as imposing an alien agenda (Levine, 1995), but as a means for broadening their perspectives and actualizing their full humanity?

Definitely, Darrow and other students like him need to experience transformative learning in order to teach our increasingly diverse students and become agents of change. Although incidences such as Darrow's initially challenge me, it is often gratifying and inspiring when such students evidence transformative learning (Dewey, 1933; Mezirow, 2000) at the completion of the course. Through my practice of transformative pedagogy (fostering dialogical relationships, humanizing teaching style, engagement in rational discourse and analysis, dialogue with others, and posing real-world problems that address educational inequities and reflection [Mezirow, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978]), students like Darrow often evidence transformative learning. Four months after writing his pre-self-reflective narrative, Darrow, in his post-reflective narrative, acknowledged experiencing a "rude awakening," and expressed a deep appreciation for the course. As he wrote:

First of all, I feel really sad that in a society like ours, there is so much social inequity and injustice. Second, I feel mad at myself for keeping my head in the hole. I had no awareness of the present state of affairs in our educational system. Before I enrolled in this course, I was exposed to the life of middle class America. My middle class ideas and values clouded my thinking. I feel convicted that I have demonstrated bias towards others who differ from me in culture, race, religion, and sexual preference. I need to humbly ask my Higher Power to change me in these biases. As one can see, exposing myself to these readings has caused me to evaluate my life. (Darrow, December, 2007)

I often find it humbly and inspiring when students like Darrow become aware of their habits of mind (Meier, 1995), points of view (Dewey, 1933), and engage in examining, reflecting, and challenging their own assumptions and premises for the mind-sets, and in the process develop alternative perspectives (Mezirow, 1991). This exemplifies the power of transformative pedagogy that Dewey and Mezirow have argued about. Dewey (1933) explains learning transformation as when a person comes to see some aspect of the world in a new way; when he/she finds new meaning, and values the new meaning. Similarly, Mezirow (2000) argues that students experience personal and intellectual growth when they grapple with disorienting dilemmas, but as they examine their assumptions related to contradictory information, and experience alternative perspectives, they ultimate-

ly acquire new knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Thus, watching students experience transformative learning, gives me hope and optimism, and makes teaching for social justice and change meaningful.

Social Justice: Front and Center

Although the notion of multicultural education is pervasive in many schools today, the achievement gap remains problematic (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Nieto, 2000); structural inequities, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, low teacher expectation and tracking remain prevalent (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Oakes & Lipton, 2007). Some multicultural scholars have also noted that many forms of multicultural education currently implemented are too soft, and lack the framework that promotes educational equity and social justice (Lee, 1998; Nieto, 2000). Today it is no longer enough for teachers merely to learn how to be sensitive to diverse students and their cultures; they must possess the habits of transformative practice and change agency (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1973; Howard, 2006; Nieto, 2000; Oakes and Lipton, 2007). Consequently, in my teaching, issues of educational equity and social justice are front and center in classroom discourse. For instance, in my courses students are engaged in: (1) critiquing, analyzing and reflecting on the sociopolitical context of schooling and education; (2) examining realities and forms of social conditions and educational inequities embedded in schools and classrooms and the impact on students; (3) analyzing and dialoguing about curricular and pedagogical practices that promote inequities and social injustice, and (4) self-analysis and developing visions of possibilities for self-transformation, empowerment, and change agency and community of practice.

In my courses, activities and assignments include self-reflective narratives, reading response papers, discussion boards, partnership shared learning, and projects (for details, see Ukpokodu, 2008). Students are exposed to multiple texts, readings and videos that allow them to construct knowledge, develop multiple perspectives and reflect on their experiences and learning. For instance, in the *Teaching for Equity and Social Justice* course, five texts are required: *Beyond Heroes and Holidays: A Practical Guide to K-12 Anti-bias Racist, Multicultural Education and Staff Development* (Lee, Menkart, and Okazawa-Rey 2006); *Rethinking Schools: An Agenda for Change* (Levine, Lowe, Peterson, Tenorio (1995); *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* (Kozol, 1991); *Teaching to Change the World* (Oakes & Lipton, 2007); *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multicultural Schools* (Howard, 2006).

Students also view, analyze and reflect on videos on racial tracking, gender bias, gay and lesbian children, immigrant and English language learners and intellectual abilities. Because of my belief in data-driven practice, I problematize my courses by engaging students in analyzing statistics related to realities, trends in education and schooling including achievement, graduation, and dropout rates of

diverse students and gay and lesbian student experiences. For example, during the second class meeting, through the use of a reader's theater strategy students read aloud a specific data or reality, followed by a vigorous discussion of the implications for their teaching. Although students often feel overwhelmed and alarmed, this one activity makes a profound impact on them and influences their inclination toward embracing teaching for social change.

Through the process of reading and analyzing students' written and reflective work—pre/post narratives, book reflection, student email correspondences, comments on course evaluation and research interviews I have conducted—most students comment on developing the knowledge, skills, dispositions for social justice teaching and change agency. Oftentimes most students metaphorically describe the difference between their pre-and post-narratives as night and day. For example, in her post-narrative, Natalie (pseudonym), a White middle school teacher in an urban school, felt inspired and better prepared to serve her students:

If there is one thing that I have learned from your class that will forever impact me and therefore my students for the better, it is the fact that I know that teachers do contribute and perpetuate inequities and injustices through their classroom practices. Do I intentionally create a classroom that contributes to inequity and injustice? Does my classroom practice reflect racial and gender bias? Do I intentionally act in ways that leave specific kids out?" My honest answers to these questions are, of course, not. Many teachers will also respond, "No. I am a good teacher and I care about all of my kids." However, as I started reading the articles and watching the videos, I realized that I am doing things that contribute to bias, things that I had never even thought about or meant to do. This is the problem that I believe many teachers in America face. Of course, we all tend to believe that we care about the kids in our classrooms and want them to succeed; but that is not enough. Teachers must be educated on the biases and inequities that are intertwined into every classroom. I did not know until now. I feel inspired and hopeful that I will be a better teacher for all my students as a result of this course. To this, I got my money's worth, and thank you! (White Teacher, fall 2006)

Like Ayers (1998) and Oakes (1995), I believe that teachers can change the world when teaching for social justice. But unless they know and understand that educational inequities and social injustice exist and even manifest in their own practices, they will continue to do business as usual (Sleeter, 2006). Most teachers I have encountered always believe that educational inequities exist only at the macro level and not in their practices. Through posing authentic questions, students become aware of their assumptions (Cranton, 2006), critically evaluate their prior understanding and new understanding and develop hope and vision of possibilities. Rachael, a former television correspondent and communication arts teacher in an urban school, illuminates this point:

Previously, my biggest conceptions about inequities in education lay mainly on the macro scale—the federal government. I ranted about how unfair it was for our national government to pass on so many mandates to schools, yet only pay

a small percentage of the budgets. Now, after having taken this course, I know that the problem also rests at the hands of teachers—on the micro level. In the classroom, I am as guilty as anyone of inequitable practices. I remember watching module three film, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*, and seeing how the teacher who thought she was equitable in her classroom, was not. The video made me take a closer look at simple things, like who I call on in class. It also made me see just how easy it is to *think* you're doing things right in the classroom. To be equitable and just in the classroom, I need to learn to systematically observe my practices from an equity and justice perspective. (White American, fall 2006)

Earlier in this article, I discussed my experience with Darrow, who expressed negative feelings toward “differences” and harsh criticisms of courses that promote equity and social justice. Darrow, in his post-narrative assignment, wrote, “I am grateful that I have a professor who lives, eats, drinks, and sleeps this subject matter. I feel hopeful that I have the opportunity to be aware of my biases and to take action to correct them so that I become a decent human being and responsible educator that my students deserve.” In the end, Darrow gave me one of the most memorable commendations I have ever received. First, after reading and completing the book analysis assignment on *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*, Darrow emailed me that he had contacted the author, Gary Howard (2006), about joining his REACH (Respecting Ethnic And Cultural Heritage) program. He acknowledged the promise of transformative and critical pedagogy and his own beginning transformation. As he wrote: “In this course I was challenged to be a transformative educator. Never in my history was I ever challenged to do so. In the same light, I cannot think of anyone who was a transformative educator; Dr. U is the first.”

Preparing education students for transformative learning is critical because, as Parker Palmer (1998) reminds us, “We teach who we are” [and what we believe] (p. 1) and an unexamined life on the part of a teacher is a danger to every child (Howard, 2006). Gay (2003) echoes, saying, the essence of being a good teacher is more than powerful content or skillful pedagogy, that it is more about how we live our lives as people and as teachers (p.7).

Humanizing the Teaching-Learning Context

Teaching for social change requires that students be viewed as subjects as opposed to objects to be manipulated (Ayers, 1998; Shor, 1992). Thus, I engage in pedagogy that humanizes the teaching and learning context. I view students as co-learners. As such, I engage their input in constructing courses. This process begins even before I meet with them. Using the university's pathway tool, I make contact with students to introduce the course, provide a list of required texts to get a head start, and administer a survey to solicit their input on the course construction regarding topics, learning style and assessment preferences (Shor, 1992).

Oftentimes, because of the diversity in student preferences, I construct two assignment options and have students vote on them. This practice reflects a learning community where participants become co-learners and are “united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience” (Loughlin, 1991, pp.320-321). Humanizing the teaching-learning context also means that I create spaces for interaction, relationships, dialogue, and communal learning (Shor, 1992; Taylor, 1998; Wenger, 2002). It means I must create a safe context in which learners feel accepted, respected, and supported (Taylor, 1998). “Voicing” is a critical element of this process. To foster dialogic spaces, I engage students in norm-building such as respect for difference, valuing multiple perspectives and rational discourse, and active and equal participation. I also engage in story-telling and sharing, which allows students and me to connect and bond. I tell stories about my diversity experiences and my journey toward becoming a critical and social justice educator. I tell students about fighting for myself, my children, and my grandchildren. Most students often get emotional listening to my stories, learn to identify with me, understand my passion for social justice and free themselves to tell their stories. Scholars have spoken to the power of stories as mirrors, opportunities, and invitation to others to participate and in turn tell their own stories (Gay, 2000; Jackson, 1995). I have found that humanizing the context of teaching and learning profoundly minimizes student resistance and fosters their inclination to engage in courageous discussions and learning.

Practicing a Pedagogy of High Expectation

Recently, Education Secretary Arne Duncan indicted America’s colleges of education for inadequately preparing teacher candidates for successful teaching and called for drastic reforms. Over the years some scholars have also indicted teacher education for the pedagogy of low expectation and viewing teacher candidates as “babies” and empty vessels (Kincheloe, 1993, p. 11), and thus providing less rigorous curricular experiences that fail to prepare candidates for critical thinking, self-reflection and analysis. For me, teaching for social justice begins with high expectations for all students. I challenge students to engage in systematic self-analysis and reflection, including social inquiry and to deconstruct hegemonic assumptions, beliefs and values embedded in their cultural socialization and classroom practices. I inundate students with complex texts, readings, assignments and assessments. I push for high quality work with appropriate scaffolding such as fostering partnership learning, establishing clearly-identified, criteria-referenced completion and scoring measures (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000) and providing prompt and informative feedback and opportunities to revise unsatisfactory work. Justin’s (pseudonym) comment sheds some light:

The course opened my eyes to the fact that perhaps I have not been challenged enough by my self and other professors. Prior to this course I had never written scholarly papers. In fact, I had never read materials that brought to life issues of

educational equity and social justice. The readings from an array of perspectives really opened my eyes to issues of educational inequities and injustice. Thank you for challenging me!

Struggles and Paradoxes

Student Resistance

Several scholars remind us that doing social justice work, including teaching courses that address diversity and social justice, is not easy (Cochran-Smith, 2004, Nieto, 2000; Ukpokodu, 2003); it is comparable to teaching against the grain. Teaching diversity courses that are approached from a critical multicultural stance (Brown, 2004; Ukpokodu, 2003) and critical pedagogy inherently engenders student resistance. Several scholars and educators have documented their experiences of student resistance and negativity with teaching diversity courses (Ahlquist, 1991; Hartung, 1990; Tatum, 1994, Ukpokodu, 2002; 2003). While most students in my diversity courses do experience transformative learning and express appreciation for the learning, I have had similar experiences documented in the literature. Students who mostly resist my courses often exhibit cognitive dissonance and feel implicated by the discourse.

I regularly use *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*. Some students have reacted negatively to the book, to the extent that they plagiarized by submitting reviews of the book rather than reading it. Once I conferenced with a student who plagiarized, but who argued that reading the first two chapters was “sickening” and so she could not finish reading the book. However, although sadly, the teacher emailed later to say that the course and the book had caused her to reflect deeply about her teaching and who she is; that she had come to the conclusion that her students deserved more than she could offer them and that she planned to resign from teaching. Generally, I empathize with students who struggle with the inconvenient truths and discourses about America's socio-cultural and political history and systems of institutionalized oppression and social injustice. Also, I am often sympathetic because of encapsulated cultural socialization and the miseducation they have received prior to entering my courses. Engaging in critical dialogue of high intellectual rigor to question their sociopositionality and the beliefs, values and knowledge they have been socialized, can be disorienting and uncomfortable. So I must find ways to learn with them and help them learn how to grow from their experiences. As Shor and Freire (1987) explain:

I must recognize that students cannot understand their own rights because they are so ideologized into rejecting their own freedom, their own critical development, thanks to the traditional curriculum. Then, I have to learn with them how to go beyond these limits, beyond their own learned rejection of their rights. (p.107)

Disillusionment

At the completion of each semester, I take the time to reflect on my teaching and the impact made. While I often feel satisfied that I have given it my all and that I may have started my students on their journey toward transformation of self, praxis and schools, I also wonder how many will actually engage in transformative practice in their schools and classrooms. I often worry about my students' experience of disappointments, fears, and powerlessness, as they leave my courses and go into school settings that are traditional and promote conventional practices. Most students who enroll in my classes are teachers in school districts that use mandated curriculum and scripted instruction. Students have expressed disappointment and disillusionment about the lack of opportunity to put to practice what they have learned in my courses. Some former students (teachers) who have attempted to use their new-found knowledge and sense of empowerment to engage in transformative practice in their schools have experienced severe consequences, such as job termination. I have had some teachers whose contracts were not renewed because the principal found their ideas too "radical." While writing this piece, I had a telephone conversation with a former student who was experiencing differential treatment and harassment at her school because she was putting her ideas of social justice into practice. Evidently, she was spending more time in teaching the mandated curriculum than the school allowed, even though she had argued that the students needed more instructional time. She had received unscheduled observations, written warnings, and now fears she may lose her job. In these situations, I, too, feel disappointed and disillusioned. On the last day of my class, I often share with students Herbert Kohl's (1967) profound statement:

Every teacher has a responsibility, as a craftsman, to hone her or his skills and refuse to believe there is one child destined to failure. Similarly, every teacher has a responsibility, as a citizen, to act politically in the name of his or her students for the creation of a just world where children can do rewarding work and live happy lives. If that means being criticized by administrators, becoming involuntarily transferred or even fired, one should be proud of being a troublemaker in a troubled world. (p. 67)

It is distressing when some of my students get fired and there is nothing I can do other than write glowing letters of recommendation for them as they search for new jobs. In these instances, I ask a critical question: How well have I prepared these teachers to negotiate and navigate the political contexts in their schools? Am I pushing these teachers to do what they are not ready for? How could I emphasize to them the need to teach for survival and yet not teach against their conscience? How can they do social justice work and not get fired? I applaud my students who have mustered the courage to engage in socially just teaching and political activism but I also feel terrible for the price some pay for their integrity and commitment to this ideal. At the same time I also worry about other students who resist the course, fail to develop the knowledge for transformative intellectualism

and change agency and those who leave the course with the knowledge and yet feel powerless and unwilling to challenge the status quo because they are afraid of costly consequences. By inaction, these teachers contribute to sustaining the status quo. These are the teachers that I worry about the most because of the harm they cause innocent children, our precious human resource.

Social Justice Fatigue

Recently, I attended a professional development meeting where the presenter asked us, “What is the hardest thing about doing diversity and social justice work?” For me, doing social justice and activist work is hard and emotionally exhausting, especially when one works in an environment where the talk often does not match the walk. As the only faculty member of color in my division, I find that I must bear the burden of ensuring that we are living the core values of diversity and social justice that are reflected in our conceptual framework. Even though the concepts of diversity and social justice have become pervasive in my institution’s culture, I find that issues and practices of inequities and injustice are often ignored unless I raise or question them.

A few years ago, we were hiring for a faculty position. We had stressed the need to seek candidates who were open and committed to diversity. During the search process I painfully observed that my colleagues were not observing for the diversity competency of the candidates even when some candidates had displayed racist attitudes and behaviors. I have felt pressured to support candidates’ hiring even when their commitment to diversity and our urban mission was questionable. I have gone home from meetings emotionally distressed because no one else could recognize or stand up for the values we say we believe in. I have also been in meetings where racist and discriminatory comments were made against individuals and no one else would challenge such comments or support me when I challenged them. I have sat across tables from colleagues during meetings in which an applicant’s accent or nationality was negatively discussed without the least sensitivity toward me as one who is linguistically different. I now risk being invited to serve on search committees because of my critical scrutiny of candidates’ diversity commitment. It is hard to know that inequities and injustices exist, and not speak up or challenge them. It reminds me of Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) powerful statement:

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a travesia, a crossing. I am again an alien in a new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape “knowing,” I won’t be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. Knowing is painful because after “it” happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before. (p.48)

Navigating Challenges

Teaching for change is not easy but is needed if we must change the achievement, learning gap, and community gaps and prepare students for effective citizenship in a multicultural democracy. I have a reputation for critical and “hard” teaching because I engage students in “controversial issues,” the inconvenient truths, and in critical reflection. While I am empathetic toward my students who are also victims of the education and socialization they have received, I am compelled to act in the interest of many children who may become victims of my students. As Nieto (1998) explains,

We [educators] should see ourselves first as academics and as such we need to promote critical and thoughtful analyses of the many issues and concerns that are at the core of multicultural education. But because these issues and concerns also challenge deeply held views and feelings, to leave these unattended is to abrogate part of our responsibility as educators. (p.28)

Student resistance is one of the critical challenges I encounter in my social justice work. But I have learned to be patient and persevere. I have learned to be empathetic toward students who feel shame, guilt, anger, and resentment, because of the cognitive disequilibrium they experience. Once in my undergraduate course, a 23-year-old White student openly expressed in tears how she had inferred from my course that every thing she had learned, believed, known and valued all her life was wrong and false. She was socialized into the beliefs and values of individualism, dualistic thinking, competition, and orderly and quiet classrooms, but was learning in the course that she must be culturally responsive by promoting cooperative, collaborative and communal learning and community. In these instances I feel empathy for students, especially those with European, middle-class and suburban background. I become patient in helping them understand the reality of diverse others and their worldviews, and the importance of developing the habit and mind of a “cultural broker” (Gay, 1999) and change agent. I have also come to empathize with my European American students who often resent and resist assignments that ask them to interrogate hegemonic ideologies and internalized privileges and biases that sustain systemic inequities and injustices. I empathize with my European American students who struggle with the “guilt by association” syndrome because of their membership in the dominant culture.

My empathy comes from the fact that, like them, and as an African, I experience the guilt by association when I am hated or disliked by some native-born African Americans who blame me for what my ancestors allegedly did to their ancestors. I often share with my White students, that like them, I can say that my ancestral lineage did not participate in the African slave trade. However, I do take responsibility by acknowledging that the African slave trade was wrong and inhumane, that the experience has engendered my commitment toward educating for human freedom and advocating for quality education for the descendants of

African slaves. Similarly, I have also learned to be patient with my colleagues who are learning to engage in the diversity dance (Howard, 2006). For example, rather than sarcastically respond to a colleague who says to me, “Do you think I am racist?” I take the time to help the colleague examine the context of her/his interactions and relationships, as well as the language he/she uses and how and why the “other” might racialize those messages.

Conclusion

I conclude this article by summarizing what it means to be a critical educator of social justice and activist in the context of teacher education. As a social justice educator in teacher education, I am reminded that teaching is a calling, aimed at transforming lives and changing the world. However, before a teacher is able to transform the lives of his/her students, he/she must first become transformed. As Nieto (2004) puts it, you must first become a multicultural person before you become a multicultural educator (p. 398). Because beliefs, values and attitudes are critical and connected to a teacher’s effective practice, it is important that they develop self-knowledge, an awareness of self as a cultural being, and social location, especially an awareness of the ways culture shapes one’s worldview and their impact on interactions, relationships and expectations for the “other.” To teach to transform students’ lives and change the world, teachers must have heightened awareness of educational inequities and social injustice. Because most teachers often have a history of the “perfect academic walk” in their K-12 schooling, they are unaware of the gross systemic inequities and injustice in the educational system. Consequently, a critical educator of social justice must commit to preparing teachers for transformative learning and development of socio-cultural and political consciousness and a sense of agency for social change. Given the complexity of contemporary America’s multicultural democracy and the unprecedented challenges of an interdependent world, teachers must develop a renewing critical pedagogy that moves them from technicist (Kincheloe, 1993; McLaren, 1998; Shor, 1992) to transformative practitioners and change agents (Giroux, 1988; Greene, 1998).

To be a critical educator of social justice and activist is to expect and take risks that oftentimes may be costly. But as history has informed us, the great social revolutions and changes that have occurred, that have brought us many benefits that most of us enjoy today, did not occur without people taking action. The historic election of President Barack Obama came to fruition because of the struggles and sacrifices of many. Critical educators of social justice must be committed to continuing the same struggle and sacrifices if we are to have a more humane, equitable, just and better world. hooks (1994) reminds us that we must be risk takers, fully committed to cultural diversity, and embrace a worldview that transcends race, tribe, class and nation and be self-reflective critical thinkers who are not afraid to confront and are open to change. Howard (2006) echoes

this charge, saying that critical educators of social justice are strong advocates for equity who actively respond to inequities and injustice and critically examine each choice they make “regarding educational structure, process, content, curriculum, or pedagogy” (p. 82).

Finally, I must emphasize that while doing critical social justice work is challenging, it is intrinsically the most rewarding undertaking. There is nothing more humbling and gratifying than knowing that you are a part of the larger struggle. I deeply believe that teaching for social justice is the key to social change and a better world, and that educators, regardless of the level they teach, hold the key to realizing this goal. Personally, while I experience frustration, disappointment, and sometimes disillusionment as I approach my work each day, I find that I cannot give up. I know firsthand that it takes too much time, energy and emotional investment to engage in social justice and activism, especially when I encounter individuals who do not share my ideas of diversity, equity and social justice, and may be indifferent, hypocritical, and comfortable in the “luxury of ignorance.” For me, I have learned to be patient, and have my eyes on the greater prize—social justice for every child and a better world for us all. Each day, I feel renewed and nourished by the wisdom of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when he says, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” The wisdom of Gloria Anzaldúa tells me that my “lineage is ancient and that my roots like those of the mesquite” are firmly planted (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 234).

Anzaldúa (1987) reminds me of my own cultural roots and the strength I draw from them as I approach the delicate, complex, contested work and terrain I tread. So I must continue to teach my conscience and to organize and form allies for social change. I have derived a great deal of benefits and satisfaction from membership in various professional organizations. The opportunity to network with colleagues who share my interests, concerns, and even frustrations helps me negotiate and navigate the potholes and battles embedded in social justice and activist work. In the end, I must be wise as I navigate difficult terrains. I recognize that if I know the truth and the cause of social justice and social change, I will know what to do in times of challenge and difficulty. Working for social justice and social change is not easy. It is hard, but it is profoundly gratifying, and I wouldn't change it for anything in the world. As the late Joe Kincheloe (2008) puts it, we must “live our ideology, we must discover ways of engaging in a critical ontology that remake our ways of being in the world to reflect the radical love and social justice” (p.79). I am hopeful and inspired to be among all others who are committed to reconstructing a world that is more humane, equitable and just. Teaching for social justice is teaching to change the world, and nothing could be more rewarding!

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