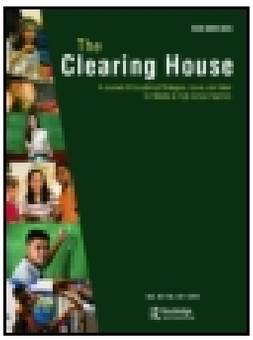

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Becoming Teachers for Social Justice: Raising Critical Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

This article shares processes and practices which foster students' critical consciousness. Critical consciousness, the core of social justice teaching, is a heightened awareness of the world and the power structures that shape it. Teachers can become forces for equity and change by: challenging students to reflect critically on their beliefs and the sources of these beliefs; using text to guide students to look outwards and discover the perspectives and challenges of others; selecting texts purposefully to heighten student awareness of issues of power and equity; teaching students to read texts critically, listening carefully for the points of view of others often ignored or silenced; creating space for dialogue beyond text; and finally, making the world their classroom, blurring the boundary between schools and communities as students research the world and take steps toward change in ways that recognize and re-value our common humanity. Becoming teachers for social justice entails moving students through intentional processes and practices to foster critical consciousness in the hope of effecting change.

KEYWORDS

Social justice; literacy; adolescents; curriculum

There is an increasing call for social justice teaching. National standards for the preparation of secondary English, social studies, math, and science teachers (i.e. NCTE, NCSS, NCTM-CAEP, NSTA) as well as middle level teachers (AMLE) stipulate the need for ethical, equitable, and culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and pedagogy. Guiding professional educational research organizations such as AERA include a program for social justice, complete with a mission statement expressing their commitment to promoting diversity and inclusiveness. Such language prompts action.

According to Bell (2007), social justice is both a goal and a process with the objective being a society in which there exists equal participation among groups, equitable distribution of resources, and physically/psychologically safe members. The process of attaining social justice, however, is complex, constant, and often messy, frustrating, and long (Mthethwa-Sommers 2014). It entails democratic, participatory, inclusive, and collaborative actions to effect change (Bell 2007).

According to Freire (2013), we can begin to teach for social justice by raising critical consciousness. Critical consciousness, the core of social justice teaching, is a heightened awareness of the world and the power structures that shape it. Our critical consciousness increases as we come to perceive contradictions and oppressions in the world. We come to notice the difference between those who have and those who do not and ponder the reasons why. We come to notice incongruities and coercions in surrounding societal structures.

Teachers for social justice structure learning experiences which develop their students' critical awareness. These teachers try to foster in students a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns in themselves and in the world which surrounds them. In short, they teach by raising student consciousness and then trusting that students "will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond" to the inequities and injustices they come to recognize and realize (Freire 2014, 81). Agency and engagement is intrinsic to social justice teaching in a democracy because as learners challenge individual and systemic forms of injustice, they also learn how to be active and engaged citizens.

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As citizens, researchers, and teachers, we recognize the urgent need to teach for social justice. In 2001, Glasgow wrote about the polarization of American society, and her words seem even more pressing today:

> In an increasingly abrasive and polarized American society, social justice education has the potential to prepare citizens who are sophisticated in their understanding of diversity and group interaction, able to critically evaluate social institutions, and committed to working democratically with diverse others. (54)

Her words ring true over 15 years later. From Charlottesville, Virginia to St Louis, Missouri to Berkley, California, our streets bear evidence of the breakdown of respectful democratic discourse in America. Amidst so much political and civic turmoil, we want for the ways and means to become teachers for social justice.

Kayla and Nicole (co-authors) are self-identified teachers for social justice. Both are high school English teachers, but they are teaching much more than Shakespeare as they guide students: to recognize prejudice in themselves as well as in others, to confront inequity in the world, and to seek those places where they want to make a positive impact. Ultimately, their goal is to blur the line between teaching and activism as they work to support students in their process of becoming change agents (Bruce 2013). Though their classrooms may look different, both of these teachers inspire students to take action to make the world a more socially just place.

Although there is no single process for social justice teaching, we have discovered important commonalities in the ways in which Kayla and Nicole raise critical consciousness among students. These commonalities reveal key, underlying practices that can support teachers and students in their efforts to become change agents. In this article, we share strategies for raising critical consciousness by re-imagining the roles of teachers, learners, and curriculum. These actions are not necessarily hierarchical, and the process is not linear. Instead, we suggest the process of raising critical consciousness is a constellation of interconnected, overlapping, and mutually supportive practices. In the following sections, we describe ways and means to support students (and subsequently, teachers) as they become a force for equity and justice.

Foster critical reflection

While we see the world through the lens of our experiences, one goal of social justice teachers is to help students become aware of the ways in which their experiences have shaped perceptions and biases. Social justice teachers want students to ask tough questions about the inequities they see in the world; however, they also want them to ask even tougher questions: Why are these the inequities that I notice? How have my life experiences and identity shaped my perceptions? What do I believe, and more importantly, why do I believe this? One strategy for fostering critical reflection is a privilege walk.

Once a safe classroom community is established and students are open to exposing and expanding their perspectives, Kayla guides a privilege walk. During a privilege walk, students line up while she reads statements such as the following: If you are a white male, take one step forward. If there have been times in your life when you have skipped a meal because there was no food in the house, take one step backward. If you have visible or invisible challenges, take one step backward. As some classmates take steps forward and others remain in place, students come to visually recognize opportunities and advantages proffered to some and not all, heightening critical awareness.

Kayla also utilizes critical reader response journals to help students become more self-aware and self-reflective. Critical reader response journals provide space and opportunity for students to respond to texts in two ways. In the first step, they respond to what they have read, recording initial thoughts and feelings elicited by the text. However, reading and responding alone does not challenge students to think critically, which is why the second step is to examine initial responses for their social and cultural influences. Students question where their initial responses come from and ponder what their responses say about them as readers and more importantly, as human beings (Pirie 1997). Kayla has utilized the

following prompts to guide critical response with students:

Re-read your initial personal response to what you have read. Why do you think you responded in this way? What are factors that might have led you to respond in this way? Do you think your response was influenced by your family or friends; by your religion, race, gender, age, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation; by your beliefs? What does your response reveal about your beliefs and perceptions about the world? What does this response lead you to realize and question about yourself?

Select texts purposefully

Social justice teachers make tough choices about what to read and what not to read, ensuring the time necessary for students to engage critically with the reading and apply it the world around them. Kayla and Nicole choose texts, both fiction and nonfiction alike, purposefully, in order to expose students to multiple world perspectives.

In her scholarship, Bishop (1990) often wrote of metaphorical windows, doors, and mirrors. Sometimes books offer windows, she explained, through which students view familiar and less familiar worlds. Windows can also be sliding glass doors through which readers walk and become part of an author's realm. And every so often, when the light is just right, a window becomes a mirror, and magically, readers see their own lives and experiences reflected in the lives and experiences of others. Social justice teachers purposefully select texts that allow students to see themselves and others. While windows and mirrors offer a metaphorical foundation, ultimately, Kayla and Nicole want the texts they choose to be doors that students walk through—both by entering the author's realm and by engaging with the world in new ways. By encouraging students to engage with the perspectives of others, they hope to inspire them to walk through real doors in the real world to promote change on behalf of the others discovered through reading.

During the course of a year, students in Kayla's English I classroom read the following: Walter Dean Myers' *Monster*, David Pelzer's *A Child Called "It"*, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*, Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone*, George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men,* John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas,* and a collection of short stories by Jimmy Santiago Baca. In Nicole's English I classroom, students read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as well as a variety of short stories, including "Thank You, M'am" by Langston Hughes. All of these texts are selected because they heighten student awareness of issues of power, privilege, inequity, and injustice.

To make the social issues addressed more authentic and immediate for students, these literary works are often partnered with informational texts. In this way, societal connections are fostered. For example, when Kayla reads *Monster*, students concurrently read articles focused around the metaphorical school-to-prison pipeline. When students read *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, they read articles related to the actual Dakota Access pipeline. Or when they read *A Long Way Gone*, they study the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. When Nicole teaches *To Kill a Mockingbird,* she also teaches *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide,* a nonfiction work that describes the ways in which women are silenced, oppressed, and subjected to sexual violence throughout the world.

Read texts critically

When we teach students to read, we are teaching much more than that. We are teaching them how to better understand the world, their place within it, and their capacity to transform both. To foster critical consciousness in readers, we can practice resistant reading, encouraging students to observe and uncover stereotypes (and counter-examples, when applicable) of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. We can be overt with our efforts, asking direct questions:

How is X portrayed? Does the author use stereotypes? Who holds power? Are there expressions of prejudice or oppression? Kayla and Nicole want to grow student understanding of the social, cultural, and political influencing the creation of text. Drawing from Knickerbocker and Rycik (2006), they ask students to consider questions such as: What do you think the author wants the reader to think and why? What do you already know about this author? What can you guess about this author? Do you think the author was influenced by his or her background when writing? Why? How? Are any voices missing from what you have read? Is there a different perspective that has not been shared or included? Why do you think so, or why not? What do you think should be added to this text, and why?

Another way to guide students to read texts critically is by using a strategy called "The-Article-of-the-Week" (Gallagher 2009). Nicole provides students with more than one version of the same media event, such as the pardoning of Joe Arpaio, encouraging students to pay close attention to the way that the same event is often portrayed differently by different media sources. She guides students to examine the subtle ways in which authors influence their readers to interpret events, drawing their attention to the emotional impact of word choice on the reader, the way that the inclusion or exclusion of particular details supports a particular perspective, and the means by which authors characterize specific public figures. Nicole emphasizes that there is no such thing as a bias-free news source and urges students to seek out diverse media representations before forming an opinion.

Teachers can also encourage perspective-taking to broaden students' understanding of diverse points of view when reading. Multivoiced journals (Styslinger and Whisenant 2004) offer a means for students to better understand a text's purpose as they encourage responses to reading in varied, culture-specific voices of characters. Students write consistently as if they are characters representative of otherness in a text they are reading. For example, when reading Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, students might respond to the story as if they are Scout, Atticus, Calpurnia, Boo, Maudie, Tom, Mayella, Bob, or Reverend Sykes. Each of these characters allow for the experience of "crossing" into the life of a cultured other: a tomboy struggling to understand herself and the events surrounding her, a single parent and Maycomb attorney assigned to represent Tom Robinson, a housekeeper and closest thing to a mother Scout has ever known, a mysterious neighbor who never comes outside, an avid gardener and one of Maycomb's most open-minded citizens, a black man accused of raping and beating Mayella, a 19-year-old white accuser, a patriarch who spends his welfare checks on alcohol and claims to have witnessed Tom attacking Mayella, the pastor at First Purchase African ME Church, or any number of lives caught in the crossfire of the growing Civil Rights Movement. Each of these character crossings allows students to become a person unlike themselves, to live through a situation unlike one they have experienced. With such an approach, students project and predict how literature speaks to/as others. Journaling from varied perspectives can lead students to a better understanding of an author's purpose for characters, plot, setting, and point of view. Ultimately, multivoiced journals have the potential to change student relationships with individuals, heightening sensitivity to issues of diversity such as race, religion, gender, or sexuality.

Talk beyond text

Social justice teachers make the world both classroom and text, raising students' consciousness by giving them opportunities to hear and see the world in new ways. In Kayla's classroom, students listen in rapt attention to a genocide survivor as they read *A Long Way Gone,* take a field trip to a civil rights museum when they read *To Kill a Mockingbird,* and visit a shelter for abused persons when they read *Speak* or *A Child Called "It"*. Nicole's students have conversations with members of the community who have been directly affected by the issues raised in books like *Half the Sky*. For example, students who choose to research the issue of dating violence sit across the table from members of the Landry family who lost a daughter to dating violence in 2012. Other students, who are researching

sex-trafficking, speak with representatives of Lighthouse for Life, an organization dedicated to eradiating human trafficking, and Cleveland Jennings, a local, private investigator who works with families as they reunite with a child who has been trafficked.

These stories and conversations are sobering and provide students with the opportunity to see the ways in which inequities and prejudices can have tragic consequences. However, we do not want students to be docile listeners. Instead, we want them to be "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire 2014, 81). Therefore, we encourage students to examine and share their own experiences. During exploratory talk (Barnes 2008), students try to make meaning with others, shaping their own thinking as well as the thinking of others during the process. As students listen to one another, they try to understand the ways in which racism, sexism, and other inequities affect their peers' daily lives. Someone questions why a black student he knows got three days of in-school suspension when another white student got one day for the same offense. A male student relates being followed by security in a department store. A female student expresses her anxiety over going out alone at night. Their peers listen, ask questions, and sometimes, express doubt. We believe that creating a space for talking, listening, and doubting is a vital part of raising critical consciousness among students.

Support inquiry and activism

Freire asserted that the process of education begins with the teacher coming to understand the students' world (Freire 2013). As the year progresses, both Kayla and Nicole focus more heavily on authentic inquiry as students are challenged to research issues important to them, inspired by the literature read across the year. Once they have chosen a social justice issue, students research their topic and interview people directly affected by the issue. Often, students also take the next step and begin working as activists in their communities.

For example, in Nicole's class, one group of students, inspired by Tom Robinson's story in *To Kill a Mockingbird,* focused their inquiry around the effects of racism on the justice system in the South. They selected and studied the George Stinney case. George Stinney was a 14 year-old African American boy who, in 1944, was the youngest person in American history to be executed. He did not commit the crime for which he was convicted, and his conviction was a result of racism, not evidence of his guilt. In 2014, the state of South Carolina was forced to admit that he was wrongly convicted, in part because of the research conducted by Nicole's students. They contacted the attorney who had filed to have the case reopened in South Carolina and asked how they could help. They did basic clerk work for the case, reading primary documents and raising questions about the evidence. This work gave them many opportunities to engage in reading and writing for authentic purposes. In the past several years, students have chosen to work on vacating an unjust conviction, proposing legislation related to the rights of sex-trafficking victims, and calling for reform to current laws that punish juveniles for certain types of sexting by putting them on the sex offender registry for life. In Kayla's classroom, students have researched and heightened community awareness about issues including: the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, the school-to-prison pipeline, AIDS, domestic violence, gun violence, women's reproductive rights, violence against the LGBTQ community, rape, and the Dakota Pipeline protest.

None of this is easy. Teaching for social justice is indeed complex, constant, messy, frustrating, and long. But we can begin by challenging students to reflect critically on their beliefs and the sources of these beliefs. More aware of their own biases, we can use text to guide students to look outwards and discover the perspectives and challenges of others. As social justice teachers, we can select texts purposefully to heighten student awareness of issues of power and equity, teach students to read texts critically, listening carefully for the points of view of others often ignored or silenced. Then, we create space for talk beyond text. Finally, we can make the world their classroom, blurring the boundary between schools and communities as students research the world

and take steps toward change in ways that recognize and re-value our common humanity. Becoming teachers for social justice entails moving students through intentional processes and practices to foster critical consciousness in the hope of effecting change. Through re-imagining our roles as teachers, learners, and curriculum, we can all become a force for equity and justice.

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