MIDWEST & PLAINS EQUITY ASSISTANCE CENTER

Equity Dispatch

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Engaging Teachers As Social Justice Actors

"It is important not only to view teachers as intellectuals, but also to contextualize in political and normative terms the concrete social functions that teachers have both to their work and to the dominant society."

- Henry Giroux

Did You Know

Teaching is a "Cultural and Political Practice" (Kozleski & Waitoller, 2009, p.65)

Critical Pedagogy is an approach that assumes that the act of teaching is inherently political in that it is derived from, resists, and maintains power in iterative processes, but ultimately has the potential to liberate (Shor, 1993). Teachers and teaching play a critical role in examining, instating, and resisting educational reforms that, ultimately, bear the most direct effect on students. The ways in which teachers are positioned, not only in classrooms but also in society at large, bears a direct impact on the ways in which policies aimed at increasing equitable opportunities are developed, appropriated and implemented. Teachers' social identities are not decontextualized from their professional identities. Both professional identity and social identity are shaped and enacted through the interactions of race, sex, gender, class, and other social identity markers. In considering both professional positionality as teachers and social identity and their implications for advancing educational equity, it is important to examine three primary issues:

1. How are teachers positioned in society?
2. Can we rethink teachers as public researchers of the educational system (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011)?
3. Can teacher activism be conceptualized to encompass broader social justice issues?

The historical influence of sexism and racism on teaching has shaped it into a semi-profession with a nuanced and distinct place in political discourse, ultimately having a direct impact on the teaching and learning conditions within classrooms. Currently, America's teaching force is largely White and female (Taie & Goldring, 2017). Historically, present-day teaching demographics have been shaped by trends and policies rooted in sexism and racism (Gladwell, 2017). In the early 19th Century, at the crest of the Age of Industrialization, men left agriculture for industrial work. Subsequently, this shift reconfigured the place and purpose of both Black and White women in society (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981). Not welcome to be business owners or industrial workers, White women shifted from "producers" in their homes and family businesses to "consumers" (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981, p. 168). Relatedly, as the Civil War ended, the economic and legal oppression of Black people in America presented a particular context for engaging in education, especially in contrast to the experience of White Americans (Collins, 1990; Perkins, 1993).

For White people, and at the cost of funding and opportunity for Black children to participate in the common school that ex-slaves had fought for (Anderson, 1988), the common school gained popularity as a means for the White working class to begin to resemble the middle and upper class (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981). Teaching in these schools, then, became a career option for White women, presumably because teaching—or dealing with children—seemed somewhat similar to work in the home (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981). Accordingly, women entering the teaching force relied on a social script of subservience, self-sacrifice, and the ability to foster a child-mother bond (Grumen-Hobart & Colleges, 1981). For Black women, the notion of educating Black youth was rooted in the emancipation and liberation of their people (Perkins, 1993; Taylor, 2005). For both Black and White women, however, exploiting the "sentimentality of teaching" (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981, p. 182) made paying women teachers less than men teachers not only an attractive option, but also a seemingly natural arrangement (Grumet-Hobart & Colleges, 1981; Taylor, 2005).

Therefore, as teaching was largely considered “women’s work,” it was also underpaid. The impact of patriarchal white supremacy, however, is made especially visible through the experience of Black teachers who “were paid a laborers wage…and had to spend part of their salaries to attend summer school…by laws that codified and systemized racism” (Fairclough, 2009).

In the mid-20th Century, at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education (1954) affirmatively stated that racially segregated schools were inherently unequal. Although Brown v. Board of Education is often cited as the leading desegregation decision (Bell, 1980; Gladwell, 2017; Orfield, 2001), less commonly discussed is the way in which the Court opinion framed desegregation, emphasizing a supposed inferiority of dominantly Black contexts (Gladwell, 2017; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tillman, 2004). The court opinions in the Brown decision delineated a desegregation strategy that was less about access to schools, and instead relied on a rhetorical argument that schools that served predominantly Black students and employed predominantly Black teachers were “less than” their White counterparts (Gladwell, 2017; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tillman, 2004). These opinions shaped desegregation throughout the country, and, at a detriment to students and society more generally, effectively provided for the attrition of Black teachers in American schools (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tillman, 2004).

Why It Matters

Teachers as Public Intellectuals (Giroux, 1988)

Engaging teachers as public intellectuals can ultimately affect student learning by broadening curricular goals to include developing critical literacies. Foregrounding definitions of “high quality teachers” predicated on student achievement positions teachers to students as mere mediators of an instructional protocol developed far from the locus of the classroom. Positioning teachers in this way draws on the history of the de-professionalization of teaching by removing the teacher’s role as an engaged stakeholder, leader, and developer of curriculum (all but one CEO of the top five textbook producers in America are White men; all are men). This approach diminishes the teacher as a public intellectual, and instead as a passive receiver of pre-developed curricula (Laitsch, 2010). This strategic positioning of teachers relies on the same sexist and racist narratives used to frame teaching as a semi-profession.

Teaching, however, has the potential to be a liberatory mechanism when used to advance learning toward developing critical literacies (Giroux, 1988; Kholi, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015). The “goal of critical pedagogy was a critical democracy, individual freedom, social justice, and social change” (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 300), but maintaining a view of education as a way toward liberation has to center the lives and experiences of those who stand to gain the most from a liberatory education. Accordingly, repositioning teaching toward learning endeavors in developing critical literacy requires a shift in how we view and value teachers, away from technical deliverers of curricula (Giroux, 1988) and toward public intellectuals (Giroux, 1988) capable of and responsible for co-constructing knowledge alongside students (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Reimagining teachers in this way has implications in moving from traditional notions of achievement, of culturally biased classroom

practices and curriculum, and toward what Paris (2017) calls “the curricularization of racial equity” (p.4). Accordingly, considering teachers in this way asks that we move away from sexist and racist notions of teacher quality, and reconsider the power of teacher autonomy and professionalism in the local development, interpretation, appropriation, and meaning making of broader policy.

Similarly, teachers can provide insight into systems of education as actors within it. In their article, “Critical Pedagogy and Qualitative Research: Moving to the Bricolage,” Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) consider the ways in which teachers can act as researchers. Although teachers are those in direct and consistent contact with students, and may be able to provide valuable insight to classroom experiences as they relate to students, it is necessary to consider teachers as researchers of educational systems as teachers are in them. Through an educational experience aimed at developing critical literacies by thinking through critical questions of historical imbalances of power, teachers could be able to engage in dialogue with students that surfaces and challenges particular power structures as they relate to students (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steingberg, 2011; Freire, 1979), as well as critical examination as it pertains to themselves as actors in a broader, often politicized, system.

For Equity Now

Engaging Teachers as Social Justice Actors Toward a Critical Reform of Schooling

(Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, 2011)

As radical sub-groups of teachers’ unions across the country mobilize in organized efforts to fight for fair wages and better learning conditions, they have been met with responses steeped in sexism that are rooted in the sexist and racist history of the development of formal teaching. Public responses that characterize the Arizona teachers strike as “squawking and whining” (Boas, 2018) rely on the delegitimization of women’s work and the dismissal of women’s rightful concerns with regard to that work.

Contemporary teacher activism can be categorized as “social movement unionism” in the sense that it “organizes workers in political struggles beyond the workplace and invokes larger themes such as human rights, social justice, and democracy” (Alter, 2012, p. 13). In order to recognize social justice concerns in contemporary teacher action, it is necessary to contextualize this action within the history of teaching as a profession and the potential for education as a liberatory practice. Importantly, considering the professional position and social identity of teachers and teaching in historical context also “places teachers’ concerns in a broader framework of the local community’s struggle against injustices” (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). This goes beyond connecting teacher concerns directly to community and student concerns, and rather places teachers in the position to build “strong ties and coalitions with parent, community, and civic organizations not only on educational issues, but on broader issues of community concern” (Hagen, 2015, p. 46). Consequently, “coalition activism and social-movement unionism emerging from radical factions in teachers’ unions that align with students and community members” can together “combat” educational and political policy that simultaneously demeans teaching as a profession and education as an opportunity to learn critical literacies (Hagen, 2015, p. 46).

Meet the Authors

This April 2018 issue of Equity Dispatch was written and edited by:

M. Nickie Coomer, Robin G. Jackson, Cesur Dagli, Seena M. Skelton, and Kathleen King Thorius

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