
Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Developing Authentic Socially-Just Spaces at the Systemic Level



“There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures.”

- bell hooks



Did You Know

Social Justice Education Was Developed to Challenge the Status Quo?

As was mentioned in the January 2019 edition of *Equity Dispatch*, [Becoming a Social Justice Educator through Critical Action](#), educators at times self-label themselves as Social Justice Warriors. The embodiment of this identity often lacks authentic critical reflection and critical action, and therefore educators run the risk of harming, not supporting the communities they serve. This month's newsletter will shift to an analysis of systems, specifically engaging in and reproducing harmful systemic policies and practices, that *other* and marginalize students and families with non-dominant identity markers. Without a critical analysis of inequitable policies and practices, people in systems pigeonhole K-12 educators into inauthentic social justice roles. Before an analysis can be done, it is important for people in systems taking a social justice approach to understand the theories, history, and original aims.

A Brief History

In his 1884 essay, Herbert Spencer asked, "What knowledge is of most worth?" This question has perplexed educators and curriculum theorists since the development of formal education, specifically within the United States. According to Broudy (1981), if education is to provide what is most essential to human survival, one must recognize that these concepts are deeply embedded in individual values (e.g. perfectionism, urgency, power, individualism, progress (Jones & Okun, 2001)) typically rooted in whiteness; thus, do not necessarily transfer across persons or cultures. Within the United States, the values that drive public education tend to belong to those with white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual, and protestant identity markers (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). Meanwhile our public education system serves an increasingly more diverse student and family population (United States Department of Education, 2016). Therefore, how do professionals working within these systems develop policies and practices that are of most worth, specifically when considering how to cultivate individual self-preservation, life's necessities, discipline, social/political relations, and personal happiness (Broudy, 1981)?

Social justice education theories were developed to not only address the aforementioned issues, but also to explicitly redress systemic oppressions and injustices harming historically marginalized groups via educational policies and practices. These theories were created in reaction to social transmission theories, which believe that a society thrives by finding ways to transmit the most current socio-economic and political structures pushing "the dominant group's desirable cultural traditions, beliefs, and values from one generation to the next" (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014, p. 8). Social justice education, while recognizing the historical purpose of formal education as conformity and socialization (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) in order to maintain the status quo (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014), also asserts that when systems act as tools of socialization they proliferate marginalizing policies and practices. Therefore, via this socio-historical context, we challenge people in systems striving towards authentic social justice to embrace "cultural, religious, and social diversity" (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014, p. 10). Theories under the umbrella of social justice education place onus on educators to recognize the role schools have had in historically marginalizing those

who do not reflect the dominant narrative, in order to begin to “transform oppressive policies and practices” (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014, p. 10).

This newsletter addresses educators who hold power and privilege at the systemic level, striving to be more socially just. To fully embrace equity-focused change there is a three-fold need to 1) understand the history of what social justice education strives for, 2) analyze the local context for historically marginalizing policies and practices, and 3) interrogate biases, beliefs, privileges, and assumptions of those who are creating policies and practices within their positions of power.



Why It Matters

Policies and Practices Position Educators as Performative Social Justice Players

In order to be an [equity-oriented educator in the name of social justice](#), educators must be able to examine their classroom practices including, but not limited to language, curricular materials, and pedagogical choices (Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, Thorius, 2016). This examination is conducted through a critical lens where educators analyze individual beliefs, assumptions, and hidden interests (Jemal, 2017), while also steeping oneself in how history impacts everyday contexts. However, once individuals begin to perceive how people engage in and reproduce systemic inequities through policy and practice, it becomes difficult to un-perceive, and creates a daunting task of what do with their newfound lens.

To ensure authenticity amongst social justice educators it is the responsibility of those with power, at the systemic level, to invite a transformative equity approach (Kyser, 2015). Those in positions of power within state and local education associations (i.e. SEA, LEA) typically hold dominant identity markers and develop policy which may be rooted in bias and assumptions, if they are not critically conscious themselves. Therefore, it is imperative within systems change to interrogate not only policies and practices, but the people enacting them as well. Finally, the voice of key stakeholders (e.g. parents/caregivers, students, teachers, and administrators) must be centered to co-construct socially-just learning policies and practices (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012). While a co-construction of equity-focused initiatives is a departure from how people in systems typically mandate policy, it signals not only a willingness to work collaboratively towards equity, but the ability to do so as well.

Once willingness and ability for systems change is present, implicit biases must be investigated. Everyone has implicit biases which are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control (Blair, 2002 and Rudman, 2004, as cited in Staats & Patton, 2013). However, it is important to highlight the caveat here, that implicit biases are particularly dangerous when couched in power and privilege. Everyone has biases; however few hold power to leverage their biases in ways that shape the context in which they are working. An example of leveraging power to act on individual bias could be proposing specific dress code policies adhering to personal beliefs surrounding professionalism. Beliefs surrounding professionalism and dress are often rooted in

white, middle class, cisgender, and heterosexual social constructions (DiAngelo, 2018), therefore discriminating against cultures that do not conform to these standards. Student refusal or inability to comply to such policies often results in removal from class or suspension from school/and or school activities. This perpetuates systemic oppression by limiting access to academics, privileging students whom conform.

Educators often do not have a voice in the creation of a policy such as dress code, but are expected to enforce regardless of their beliefs. If there is a misalignment between policies and practices and the value systems of educators, they run the risk of behaving in ways that may be perceived as inauthentic in the name of social justice. The people orchestrating the system, in this scenario, are complicit in positioning educators to reproduce the status quo, keeping minoritized students at the margins.



For Equity Now

Moving Beyond Technical-Based Approaches

In order to ensure equity-focused systems change at the systemic level we must consider the importance of moving beyond a technical, strategy-based approach, towards examining the contextual and critical aspects of schooling. As a means of moving to critical action please consider the following:

1. Incorporate a multi-tiered process which includes thinking critically about “hidden interests” (Jemal, 2017, p. 608) and whose individual experiences, values, beliefs, and norms are being protected (Radd & Macey, 2013). How has thinking been shaped as a product of social construction (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014), maintaining systems of inequality? Consider the following questions:

- What are the values and assumptions behind my practices?
- Who benefits and who is disadvantaged from policies and practices in place?
- How can we do things differently to ensure more of my students and families benefit from my practices?

2. Create policy rooted in social justice which strives towards transformative educational equity (Skelton & Kyser, 2015).

3. Consider the following guiding questions to avoid one size fits all approaches:

- What inequities are present?
- What factors are contributing to the production and/or reproduction of the

inequities? What goals do we want to establish to advance conditions for equity?

- What actions will be taken to redress inequities and advance social justice?
- How effective are the actions in making progress towards realizing established equity-focused goals?

4. Center voices of key stakeholders such as educators, administrators, students, families, parents/caregivers and community organizations to co-construct and “grapple with and define what social justice means in their context(s)” (Kyser, Whiteman, Bangert, Skelton, & Thorius, 2015, p. 4) and in regards to developing policies and practices.

5. Bypass equity-oriented foci that remain surface level. Initiatives should authentically push educators to analyze both their identities and the social, historical, and cultural context in which they are working (Dagli, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017).

6. Move beyond the rush to solve or fix problems you do not understand. Here, we see a missed opportunity to openly examine how beliefs, discourse, policies, and practices contribute to student outcomes (Warren, Kyser, Moore, Skelton & Thorius, 2016). Instead, by learning the socio-historical context of issues of inequity, educators are moving towards confronting ideologies that marginalize youth as inferior (Roegman, 2017).

While a co-construction of equity-focused initiatives is a departure from how people in systems typically mandate policy, it signals not only a willingness to work collaboratively towards equity, but the ability to do so as well.

Meet the Authors

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