

# Toward a Pedagogy of Transformative Teacher Education: World Educational Links

Judith Reed & Deborah J. Black

*As a classroom teacher, I used to believe that valuing diversity in the classroom meant learning about our differences and similarities and finding ways to work together. Creating a peaceable classroom for learning became central in my teaching. I taught strategies for conflict resolution, developed culturally responsive curriculum that promoted cross cultural understandings, and worked to help my students build self-esteem. Now as I reflect on my own past practice, I have come to believe that teaching the skills for a peaceable classroom without a focus on social justice and activism is a way of managing behaviors, silencing the marginalized, and maintaining the status quo. My limited worldview as a privileged person shielded me from seeing how my "peaceable classroom" failed to expose the inequities inherent in our political-economic system. Worse, by ignoring gross inequities or treating them as mere "differences," I was actually abetting the forces of injustice. From this painful realization and critical reflection on my own practices, I dared to imagine how teaching could be different.*

*—WEL faculty member*

Imagine for a moment teachers whose core guiding principle is Paulo Friere's (1970) notion of praxis: "reflecting and acting on the world to transform it."

Imagine for a moment teachers who foster critical inquiry and critical reflection

using readings and experiences that challenge students' assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about the world.

Imagine teachers who respond to oppression differently—not reinforcing it or turning a blind eye—but teachers who challenge all forms of exploitive oppression.

Imagine for a moment the personal engagement in transformative learning that would prepare teacher-activists to help build schools that create "a social movement against oppression" (Kumashiro, 2004, xxv).

In describing below an innovative model for teacher education, the authors hope to contribute to an interrogation of teacher education, class, and culture within the current political and economic system.

## Introduction to the WEL Program

Inaugurated at Keene State College in New Hampshire in May 2002, World Educational Links (WEL) prepares future educators for anti-oppressive teaching, critical pedagogy, and social activism. It provides post-baccalaureate initial teacher certification (either elementary or secondary) and a master's degree through a 12-month integrative immersion model.

The typical teacher education program provides an academic curriculum consisting of pedagogical methods, child development, philosophical foundations, exceptionality, literacy—each delivered in a credit-based module in the college classroom, and generally prior to any actual teaching experience. In the WEL program, this knowledge base is gained within the context of a full-year immersion experience in a school, four days a week for the entire public school year. One day a week interns

attend seminars on campus. Working with experienced mentor teachers, they are fully immersed in the life of the school.

WEL is innovative in its delivery model, but more so in its transformative mission and its focus on teacher-as-activist. The goal is transformative learning through a reconstruction of social-political-historical knowledge, demonstrated through language and action on the part of the learner. The immersion model is seen as vital not only to the delivery of traditional teacher education curriculum, but to the potential for transformation that WEL offers its interns.

Three areas of inquiry are woven throughout the content of the WEL Program:

- (1) Deconstructing the current educational system within its historical and political context.
- (2) Deep inquiry into issues of equity and social justice in a multicultural world.
- (3) Constructing a new perspective on our essential task as educators.

Implicit in these three tasks is a difficult process of self-scrutiny. This self-examination is impelled by an accumulation of evidence concerning the intern's privileged position<sup>1</sup> in an unjust social order that is founded on the existence of just such privilege.

## Deconstructing the Current Educational System Within Its Historical and Political Context

Underlying almost any discussion of school policy and practice are unvoiced assumptions about the function and purpose of public education in the United States. As interns de-construct the educational estab-

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ishment, they engage in an interrogation of these assumptions and of the competing goals of different players and policymakers. Rather than ideals of social equity, or even individual advancement, schooling in this political-economic system, with its emphasis on teaching differentiated job skills and on producing a stratified workforce through vocational and professional tracking, is seen as primarily serving to maintain societal stability, the status quo (Labaree, 1989).

As they navigate the settings in which they must function as educators, interns are encouraged to interrogate the organizational framework that shapes how teachers do their work, the organizational features that typically define a school as a school. For example,

- ◆ students grouped in classrooms by age,
- ◆ school day divided into periods, usually with bells at the start and end of each,
- ◆ content divided into certain discrete disciplines,
- ◆ students grouped by ability and assumed potential.

These rules for what constitutes “school” are, to most within the system, so broadly accepted and unexamined as to be insidiously invisible (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The structure of schooling is so “routine and common place” that it goes unquestioned. After all, this is what schools are “supposed” to look like. This is common sense (Kumashiro, 2004, xxi-xxii). Upon closer examination, interns may agree that certain of these features are actually not important for learning and some even impede most learners. Interns typically rail against them while expressing a sense of impotence regarding their intransigence.

#### *Who Benefits?*

This becomes a crucial question that we come back to again and again as we help interns process the deficiencies they see in the real world of the school, the limits they collide with, and the intractability of these factors. Central to the WEL program is the task of providing to interns a wide lens for viewing the historical-political context of the educational system in which they find themselves.

The practice of academic tracking provides one good example. Flying in the face of the evidence that tracking benefits those in the high track but not the low track students (Oakes, 1985), tracking persists.

High track students disproportionately represent the dominant culture, those who enjoy privileged social and economic status. Students of color and students from low-income families are much more likely to be placed in lower tracks. Tracking creates what Sleeter (2001) calls “zones of privilege” that have distinct racial and economic compositions.

In this example, as in countless others in the course of the year, interns experience, recall, and discuss how public education exclusively benefits the members of the dominant group, overriding commonly expressed ideals of democratic equality or social mobility.

#### **Deep Inquiry into Issues of Equity and Social Justice in a Multicultural World**

Confrontation with injustice is a crucial factor in a child’s developing sense of social responsibility (Berman, 1997), and more specifically in developing an anti-racist white identity (Tatum, 1997). WEL interns are confronted with injustice repeatedly and relentlessly throughout the year. This objective is reflected in the summer readings given when interns first enter the program and continued intensely all year long through videos, workshops and guest speakers.

Interns are thus faced with information that most of them did not learn in high school history classes, or even college (e.g., Golden et al., 1992; Rodney, 1981; Zinn, 2003). They are asked to reflect upon why it might be that, though European immigrant groups have experienced initial discrimination, most have been accepted within two or three generations, while our society has failed to accept people of color over countless generations (Takaki, 1993).

They explore the development of racial identity among Blacks, among Whites (Tatum, 1997). They view and reflect on videos such as *Broken Rainbow* (Florio & Mudd, 1986), showing how the Navajo people have been “relocated” en masse in very recent times; *Children in American Schools* (Hayden & Cauthen, 1996), illustrating Kozol’s (1991) exposure of the consequences resulting from gross inequities in school funding; and *The Color of Fear* (Wah, 1994), a deep conversation about the historical construction of racism in the U.S. and its hold on everyone.

Midway into the second semester, WEL interns take a field trip to the Global Kids exposition in New York City. This event

features performances and workshops led by inner city youth, including immigrants from around the world, organizing and speaking out. It gives interns a more intimate brush with the world of difference from which many of them have been insulated. Importantly, it also provides a model for enabling young people to take the reins in effecting social change. (See [www.globalkids.org/index.shtml](http://www.globalkids.org/index.shtml)).

Confronted thus with myriad examples of inequity and oppression, interns begin to question why these social inequities are so pervasive and persistent. They are challenged to explore the power structures that produce and maintain inequity. They are asked to consider, once again, the key question: *who benefits from the status quo?* Recognition of the power and privilege available to most WEL interns by virtue of the accident of birth becomes painfully inescapable.

Most interns anticipate a year of intense hard work, but few if any are prepared for the distress they might face in coming to realize what place they occupy as members of the oppressor class in a grossly unjust world. A precept of the WEL program is that teachers must be deeply educated about issues of equity and social justice, and ultimately about the oppressive role of the dominant White system and structure to which most of them belong, if public educators are to become a force for social change.

Most teachers enter the profession with dreams of “making a difference,” but typically this amounts to a “food and festivals” approach. There is little interrogation of the dominant discourse, into which they are continually co-opted. For example, while democratic community may be espoused within the classroom group, standardization, tracking, and testing continue unimpeded in the overall school system. These contradictory messages emanate from and are managed by the teacher. In an effort to immunize them to the effects of the school culture in which they find themselves participating, WEL interns are challenged to wrestle with contradictions existing and moving in society, but also reflected deep within themselves.

#### **Re-Constructing Our Essential Task as Educators**

A contextual understanding of the educational system, and a deep inquiry into issues of equity and social justice, lead to a reexamination of the essential task of an

educator. To underpin that process, interns are asked to examine and acknowledge their own position within the cultural-political-educational status quo (Howard, 1999) and to critique their "positionality as a beneficiary of the United States educational system" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 13).

Even if they have never uttered a bigoted comment, the quality of life that they enjoy, from the clothes they wear, to the food they eat, to the cars they drive, comes to them at the expense of others. This realization has strong implications for their personal sense of social responsibility, but it inevitably also raises a professional issue: What is the responsibility of an educator within this political-economic system?

The following essential questions are implicit in the content of the program all year long:

- ◆ Are you here because you want to make the world politically and economically more equitable?
- ◆ Will you make your teaching a tool for such social change, or a force for the status quo?
- ◆ Is it your job to help your *students* feel empowered to identify and address issues of social inequity?
- ◆ Is teaching a fundamentally political act?

Pedagogical principles promoted and practiced in the WEL program are consistent with an affirmative answer to the above questions and with principles of social equity (see Berman, 1997; Charney, 2002; Lieber, 2002). These elements allow a critical investigation of the present system of political and economic exploitation and offer possibilities for different relationships among human beings:

- ◆ Community building replaces "management" of student behavior. Developing among students a commitment to the common good and to fostering caring relationships: this is seen as a core task and a constant mission in every classroom.
- ◆ Participatory classroom processes provide students with choice and authority in the classroom, on both individual and collective levels. Interns learn methods for helping students assume responsibility in the classroom.
- ◆ Democratization of knowledge means valuing student knowledge and the co-construction of knowledge.

Interns learn ways to create a student-centered classroom based in a constructivist pedagogy.

◆ Critical inquiry and critical reflection become possible and perhaps even inevitable as students participate in a democratic community of learners. Interns are encouraged to challenge their students to question the assumptions and knowledge presented in their very textbooks.

As they attempt to practice such principles, interns begin to understand the larger picture in their schools, and they are able to see that one powerful way a school may inhibit innovation in the classroom is embedded in the very structures of the school. For example, an intern in a self-contained 5<sup>th</sup> grade wanted to design an integrated, project-based unit during his solo week, but was stumped by a schedule which broke the day into segments, never longer than one hour, some as short as a half hour, and often with some students out of the room for band or tutoring or the like. When he brought his complaints to seminar, WEL faculty responded, "Do you see how the system operates to prevent you from exercising creative autonomy?"

Interns are daunted by the task of implementing "idealistic" practices that support an anti-oppressive ideology and "best practice" pedagogical theory in inhospitable settings. They are inclined to point the finger at the "unreasonable" expectations of WEL faculty and/or at school administrators whom they hold responsible for creating the strictures.

The faculty interpret this blame-laying as a form of resistance to the necessity for activism (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). Interns are encouraged to take a larger view of such difficulties, to see the task ahead as greater than a single classroom, more than just writing and implementing good lesson plans. Rather, lesson plans, based on a theoretical understanding of systemic contradictions in society, become the mechanism for larger changes.

The goal is for interns to begin to see themselves as activists, seeking ways around the countless petty impediments and finding allies to help remove them, developing a strategic understanding of the nature of the powerful forces keeping teachers from controlling the conditions under which they carry out responsibilities that are vital to the building of an inclusive, humanistic global society.

### Transformative Learning: The Inner Process

A few brief vignettes will show a progression of transformative moments involving participants in the first two years of the program.<sup>2</sup> An active acknowledgment of one's own position of privilege in an unjust world is primal. Second, knowledge of injustice is found to be necessary but not sufficient; it needs to lead to action. Third, taking action is frightening, and the fears must be faced and acknowledged. Finally, one can't expect to feel prepared to tackle this material with students *before* one sets out to do so; becoming does not precede doing.

#### *What, Me—a Racist?*

The seminar topic was Beverly Daniel Tatum's (1997) book, "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*" The interns were asked what they learned from the book, which treats the development of racial identity among both people of color and White people. After a moment of silence Kevin volunteered, "I learned that I'm a racist. I'm a White male, so I'm a racist. It's a really unsettling idea. I don't much like it."

"Yeah," put in Diane. "I found myself feeling thankful that at least I'm not male, just White."

In her book, Tatum draws heavily on Janet Helms's (1990, 1995) analysis of the development of racial identity among Whites. The above comments reflected a new awareness of racism and White privilege, typically accompanied by "the uncomfortable emotions of guilt, shame, and anger" (Tatum, 1997, p. 97).

#### *Knowledge Needs To Lead to Action*

A guest presenter at a campus seminar asked the interns to tell how the program was enabling them to teach about issues of social justice. Ellen said that the program had given her new knowledge about important social issues, but that she'd also come to understand that knowledge is not enough—you have to take action.

Gary Howard (1999) proposes that taking action can be seen as a final stage in a journey that, in the WEL program, began when students were asked to be *honest* about who they were and to reflect critically on their privileged social position in the world. Interns were exposed to stories and information that allowed them to *empathize* with others placed in a subordinate social position. This then positioned them to move toward *advocacy*

and, finally, into *action* in the form of activism.

### *Taking Action Is Scary*

Chuck had somehow never managed to incorporate any social equity material into his high school Social Studies classes. Finally, during Black History Month, he did initiate a class discussion about racial and ethnic slurs overheard in the hallways. The students were eager to speak and uninhibited in their response, detailing the common use of such language in their homes and at school, some defending its use as unobjectionable because it was not aimed at anyone in particular. Chuck reported in seminar that he came away from this 30-minute discussion totally wrung out. He said it was the hardest, scariest thing he had done so far all year. He felt he'd opened Pandora's Box and didn't know what to do with what came out.

Taking this first step was enormously important, and talking about it with the rest of his cohort was equally important. For a White middle class male creating a second career, well defended all his life from the harsher realities of unexamined bigotry and ignorant racism, this felt like sticking his toe into shark-infested waters. He wasn't sure he'd survive total immersion.

While the fear and courage of the White intern were acknowledged by the WEL faculty, the interns were reminded that others who are not members of the dominant group are not afforded the "luxury of nonengagement," regardless of any fears they may harbor (Howard, 1999, p. 58).

### *You Can't Wait Until You Feel Completely Prepared*

In the first year of the program Karen decided to do a unit on Kwanza, which developed into a program for the entire elementary school, with guests whom she brought in to help. She was highly praised in the school for this work, and it was a peak experience for her. Moreover, when she wrote about it, her reflections revealed an important piece of wisdom. She said that this is hard material to learn about. It takes a lot of deep self-scrutiny and it's very uncomfortable. She said in effect, "I'm just beginning to do that hard work, but I can't wait until it's done before I start teaching about it. I'm just going to have to teach it while I'm learning it."

This same theme played out in the second year, when Terri spoke in seminar

about feeling unprepared to teach about prejudice and racism, fearing she might do damage by responding poorly. Others chimed in with similar sentiments. After listening to these hesitations for a time, Damon suggested they simply needed to "get over it." "You'll never really feel ready. You just have to do it." The WEL faculty member cautioned, "Don't let these fears become an excuse to do nothing."

Consistent with the findings of Gay and Kirkland (2003), WEL interns tended to resist both the work of critical self-reflection and the task of addressing inequities in schools. Early and often, WEL faculty challenged the unconscious attitudes and "maneuvers" that interns exhibited in seminar discussions and written reflections. They reminded interns that it is a political choice of no small consequence to take no action, to remain silent, particularly in light of their new consciousness.

### **Praxis: Learning to Teach for Equity and Social Justice**

As the year unfolded, the first two cohorts of WEL interns gradually transformed the way they framed knowledge and learning, translating their own personal critical inquiry and reflection into their work as budding teacher-activists. For example, the march of traditional holidays through the school calendar provided interns with opportunities for critical inquiry into the meanings and symbolisms of holidays and the nature of holidays as exclusive or inclusive within the school community.

Columbus Day fell at a time when most were still figuring out which way was up at their school sites. Articles like "Discovering Columbus: Re-reading the Past" (Bigelow, 1998) and "We Have No Reason to Celebrate an Invasion" (Harjo, 1998), sparked a heated discussion, but most interns expressed little hope of finding an entry point for sharing their new understanding with students in the school.

By Halloween, many were finding a way to critique what they were witnessing in the schools. Seminar discussions at this time included descriptions of the stereotypes that abounded in the costumes selected by elementary school children: for example, Native Americans (Indians with feathers, tomahawks and "war paint"), or elderly women (witches with warts and broomsticks). However, most interns just watched this occasion pass them by, with

belated regrets that they had failed to call attention to it.

Then came Thanksgiving, a holiday whose oppressive features are reinforced by myriads of teachers across the nation annually. Inspired by the work of anti-oppressive educators such as those at Rethinking Schools, a few interns created lessons ranging from giving thanks Native-American style, to confronting directly the conventional Christopher Columbus mythos.

Christmas overwhelmed all but the most assertive, though most gave the usual nod to Hanukkah and Kwanza. Meanwhile, however, the readings and discussions in seminar had sensitized the interns to oppressive practices and policies in school and to the numerous examples of how the curriculum marginalized groups of people. The interns were now positioned to create learning experiences for their students that engaged them in critical inquiry.

January brought Black History Month, but by then some interns were able to dissect this reliance on occasional holidays and special months, and during the second semester most developed ways to incorporate multicultural and social justice material into the mainstream mandated curriculum, regardless of the time of year. Having begun with a new lens for viewing the holiday practices at schools, they had moved to the transformative level of curriculum reform (Banks, 2001), as reflected in both their language and their classroom practice (Jennings & Smith, 2002). The following are just a few among many examples:

- ◆ In a lengthy unit on immigration, Ellen created opportunities for second graders to celebrate global cultures and to explore issues of cultural identity.
- ◆ In an eighth grade unit on the Industrial Revolution that focused on life in a New England mill town, Alan led a discussion of the differences between Irish- and African-American assimilation.
- ◆ Damon's lesson on the Boston Massacre required fifth grade students to engage in a critical interrogation of attitudes and perspectives implicit in different artistic renditions of the event.
- ◆ Robin's full-blown original role play on "Westward Expansion" challenged another fifth grade class to compare and contrast the viewpoints of mul-

tiple members of society: European settlers from different socio-economic classes, native Americans, African slaves.

♦ Seth showed *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Sun, 2001) to his sophomore English class and facilitated a heated and intensely engaging discussion of the images of race, class and gender that are presented in children's cartoons.

♦ When his turn at solo teaching came up, Kevin was given to understand that he might, for that week, cover the material however he chose, though the content was prescribed. In particular, he was assigned the topic of "light and sound" as his science unit. Kevin planned a thematic study of India, beginning with an impersonation of Ghandi and a recital on the sitar. (The topic of "sound" was already well under way.) All week his students were immersed in a study of Indian culture. Simultaneously, he addressed the content of the core curriculum and made sure the students learned principles governing light and sound.

### Taking Stock

#### An Ethic of Activism

"Before, I thought that teachers should stay away from politics and any political agendas, since school is the place to simply acquire academic knowledge," wrote Gail near the end of the year, "but now I see myself making so many political decisions in a single teaching day that it hardly excludes politics from teaching."

Writing about Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Diane reflected that "encouraging dialogue, leadership, and questioning in students is helping them find their own way to truths, and to being active, engaged citizens *who can create change*" [emphasis added].

This is exactly the pedagogy that the WEL program seeks to impart, and also to employ in working with the WEL interns. To this end, interns encountered in the WEL program an ethic of activism which supported, encouraged and sometimes drove them in their fledgling efforts at social change through public education.

#### Looking Forward

As they disperse and enter professional life within a vast social institution whose function is to maintain the status quo, will these new teachers resist the

pressure to conform? Will they comport themselves as teacher-activists in their new professional world?

Taking the pulse of the cohort near the end of the second academic year, WEL faculty felt guardedly optimistic regarding the transformative effects of the program. Many interns had been attracted to the program because of the one-year time frame and the master's degree that would accompany teacher certification. The focus on equity and cultural issues was understood but not necessarily important to them at the outset. Barriers to self-reflection and critical thinking regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity (Gay & Kirkland, 2003) did persist among some WEL interns.

However, some eschewed the "luxury of ignorance" (Howard, 1999, p. 58), opening themselves to the barrage of new images and perspectives, and allowing themselves to adopt a new way of framing social-political knowledge. These interns experienced an internal revolution that not only influenced their teaching practice, but often affected their lives in far-reaching and sometimes difficult areas, including family relationships.

Initial results seem to validate the efficacy of a teacher education model that integrates theory with practice in an immersion experience, rather than providing theory in the college classroom apart from meaningful fieldwork. Mentors and WEL faculty alike considered the interns from each cohort to be very well prepared as teachers, and graduates have been successful in finding employment.

In sum, WEL has yielded promising results among its first two cohorts. Initial lessons have been learned about fostering the development of a new consciousness and about helping interns transform knowledge into action. Further study is called for regarding:

- (1) how to deepen the transformational process for a largely Euro-American student population faced with a non-Euro-centric curriculum;
- (2) the performance of WEL graduates in their first teaching jobs and beyond;
- (3) the importance of faculty composition;
- (4) partnerships with cooperating schools and the transformative effects of the program on mentor teachers and partner schools; and
- (5) the potential for systemic transfor-

mation within the institution, simultaneous with the effects of institutional resistance on the program.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first two WEL cohorts consisted of 13 to 16 exclusively Euro-American students.

<sup>2</sup> Participants' names are fictional, though the activities described are authentic.

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## Call for Contributors to Voices of Justice, the New Creative Writing Section of *Multicultural Education Magazine*

*We're seeking* submissions of creative writing on topics including diversity, multiculturalism, equity, education, social justice, environmental justice, and more specific subtopics (race, gender/sex, sexual orientation, language, (dis)ability, etc.). Do you write poetry? Short stories or flash fiction? Creative nonfiction? We will consider any style or form, but we prefer prose that is no longer than 750 words and poetry that can fit comfortably onto a single page of text.

*Submissions will be reviewed on a rolling basis.*

And... If you're a teacher, Pre-K through lifelong learning, please encourage your students to submit to us! We would love submissions from the youngsters as well as the not-so-youngsters!

**Where to Submit:** Submissions may be sent electronically or by postal mail. Electronic submissions should be sent to Paul C. Gorski at [pgorski01@gw.hamline.edu](mailto:pgorski01@gw.hamline.edu) with the subject line "ME Submission." Hard copy, mailed submissions should be addressed to: Paul C. Gorski, Graduate School of Education, Hamline University, 1536 Hewitt Avenue, MS-A1720, St. Paul, MN 55104.

**Format:** All submissions should be double-spaced, including references and any other materials. Please send one copy of your submission with the title noted at the top of the page. The title of the manuscript, name(s) of author(s), academic title(s), institutional affiliation(s), and address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the author(s) should all be included on a cover sheet separate from the manuscript. If you are a student or if you are submitting work on behalf of a student, please include age, grade level, and school name.

**What to Send:** If you are submitting your work via postal mail, we ask that authors send the full text of the submission on a 3-and-one-half-inch High Density PC-compatible computer disk in any common word-processing program. If you wish the manuscript or other materials to be returned after consideration and publication, please also send a stamped and addressed return envelope large enough for that purpose.

*Please address questions to Paul C. Gorski at [pgorski01@gw.hamline.edu](mailto:pgorski01@gw.hamline.edu)*