

“Would That Be Social Justice?” A Conceptual Constellation of Social Justice Curriculum in Action

ELISABETH JOHNSON, RACHEL OPPENHEIM,
and YOUNJUNG SUH

CUNY, College of Staten Island, New York, USA

For new educators, the obstacles of high-stakes testing, curricular mandates, and their own inexperience and self-doubt can render teaching for justice and equity overwhelming, seemingly impossible ideals. However, as students are increasingly tied to prescriptive curricula and academic performance standards, the goals of social justice and democracy are all the more necessary. Through interviews and observations with new educators, the authors argue that, despite difficult, often restrictive teaching environments, these educators are indeed engaged in teaching socially just curricula in a variety of innovative ways. Beginning teachers’ stories and their inspiring curricular enactments are at the heart of this article.

Lucy, a first-year teacher, had just finished describing a social studies curriculum that she created, a year-long unit of study in which social stratification was a central theme and in which issues of power, media representation, and historical oppression were addressed in depth. She stopped suddenly, unsure of herself, and asked, “Would that be social justice?”

Hers may seem like a peculiar response; after all, justice and social equity were focal topics in her curriculum. However, if we view Lucy as a novice teacher,

Address correspondence to Elisabeth Johnson, CUNY College of Staten Island, 2800 Victory Boulevard, Department of Education, 3S-225, New York, NY 10314, USA. Email: elisabeth.johnson@gmail.com



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *The New Educator* journal. It is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or *The New Educator*. *The New Educator* is published by the School of Education at The City College of New York.

hesitant about her place in a large, standards-driven public school system, doubtful of her own ability to reach all of her students and to impart to them both academic skills and strongly held convictions, her question is more understandable. In fact, insecurity about one's own ability to teach for social justice would seem typical for a beginning teacher. For new educators, the obstacles of high-stakes testing, curricular mandates, and their own inexperience and self-doubt can render teaching for justice and equity overwhelming and seemingly impossible ideals. However, as the stranglehold of the No Child Left Behind Act intensifies and teachers and students are increasingly tied to prescriptive curricula and academic performance standards, the goals of social justice and democracy have become all the more necessary.

The objective of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate that it is both possible and essential for new educators to enact social justice curricula in their classrooms in a variety of ways. We present the vignettes of three beginning teachers enacting social justice curricula in their classrooms. These vignettes illustrate that the forms that these curricula take may look vastly different in different classrooms and are contingent upon a number of intersecting factors, including the teacher's background, her students, and her prior conception of social justice. In presenting these vignettes, we hope to expand the definition of social justice and to argue that all of the disparate forms of social justice curricula that we observed were compelling and vital. We contend that a broad and contextually contingent definition of social justice curriculum is one that will best support and encourage burgeoning social justice educators. Our hope is that these three new educators' stories and their ideas can serve as inspiration, motivating others to enact social justice curricula at a time when it is so crucial and yet too often absent from the American school day (Sleeter, 2005).

The three authors of this article came together as part of a graduate level research seminar that was designed to investigate the social justice curricular enactments of beginning teachers. At the time we, the authors, were doctoral students. In addition, all of us are former classroom teachers who are committed to social justice as a vital but often overlooked component of today's schools. Two of us are white North Americans and one is Korean. We recognize that, just as many factors affected our participating teachers' pedagogy and practice, our own backgrounds, experiences, and prior conceptions strongly influence our research and our beliefs about social justice and classroom practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Indeed, our convictions and beliefs not only affect our research, but they are also the reason that we chose to engage in this research at all.

NEW TEACHERS TALKING AND TEACHING ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE

In the tradition of narrative inquiry, as defined by Ershler (2001), this project initially determined to ask new educators who recently graduated from the same preservice elementary program to tell their stories of learning to enact and the practice of enacting social justice curriculum. We also asked each new teacher to develop and enact a social justice lesson which would display her knowledge *of* practice, *in* practice, *for* practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). Implicit in these components of our study is our commitment to exploring and reconsidering educational theory *in motion*. This is to say, we are interested in conducting research that asks new teachers to consider themselves as agents in their teaching and planning of social justice curriculum enactments – to step out of the moment, talk about it, record it, and talk about it again, as a means to re-center the new educator in the sphere of educational influence. Ershler (2001) explains that so often early career teachers, with little time to systematically reflect on the details and important moments of teaching, end up locating themselves on the periphery of educational influence. But we believe that (1) abstract or “top down” theories of education take shape as they are considered and reconsidered in light of teachers’ “bottom-up” theories of practice (Williams, 1996) and (2) educators learn about teaching when they ask and observe how other educators enact curricula in their classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; McDonald, 1992).

Teacher storytelling in research facilitates a teacher’s naming and reflecting on experience—a process which “requires that they actively think about what they have done as they prepare to articulate it for others” (Ershler, 2001, p. 163). Moreover, the process has the potential to support “teachers’ sense of agency in their work” (p. 164). The work of documenting, compiling, and sharing social justice enactments with practitioners holds promise for qualitative researchers and educators interested in developing recursive partnerships, e.g., exploring social justice theory in practice and mapping social justice practice onto theory.

OUR JOURNEY TO AND IN THREE TEACHERS’ CLASSROOMS

The findings that we present emerged out of a doctoral research seminar in which we, the three authors, participated as co-researchers. Using a multi-case study approach, members of this seminar applied qualitative research methods to examine the ways in which beginning teachers conceived of and enacted social justice curricula in their classrooms. We entered our study guided by the following three research questions: (1) What experiences inform beginning teachers’ conceptions and enactments of social justice curriculum? (2) What are beginning teachers’ conceptions of social justice curriculum? (3) How do beginning teachers incorporate social justice issues into their practice? Our hope was that by studying new

educators' enactments of social justice curricula we would begin to understand the factors that must be in place in order to encourage social justice commitments and curriculum enactments. Such an understanding might in turn inform teacher education and professional development programs with commitments to social justice schooling, allowing them to better meet the needs and concerns of beginning teachers.

All participating teachers were graduates of the same preservice program and had completed an intense two-year set of courses with fieldwork, assignments, and readings that included a strong emphasis on social justice themes. Throughout their program, students had explored issues of power, injustice, and educational equality, and had been asked to evaluate their own ingrained assumptions based on their raced, classed, gendered identities. In addition, all had completed at least one semester of student teaching in poor, underserved public schools in order to further their understanding of the inequities that exist both within and across different educational settings. Members of the doctoral seminar wondered what impact this preservice program had on teachers once they entered their classrooms and how that experience had informed their notions of social justice curricula. A letter was sent to recent graduates of the program, asking them to participate in this study. Twelve teachers responded and over the course of a semester, each doctoral student researcher was paired with a participating teacher. The teachers presented in this article were all teaching in public elementary schools in New York City.

We, the doctoral student researchers, used a variety of ethnographic research methods in order to mine beginning teachers' conceptions of social justice, explore how those conceptions were formed, and examine the ways that they manifested themselves in teachers' pedagogy and their curriculum enactments. To begin, each researcher conducted an initial semi-structured interview with her teacher participant. The purpose of this first interview was to investigate the teacher's ideas of social justice, to probe the events and circumstances that led to those ideas, and to explore that teacher's conception of what social justice looks like in action. Next, the beginning teacher was asked to invite the researcher to observe between one and three instances of social justice curriculum in her own classroom. The researcher observed these lessons and conducted informal interviews both before and after each observation in order to gauge the teacher's hopes for the lesson and her reactions after the lesson was completed. In many cases, e-mail exchanges between the researchers and teachers served as valuable pieces of data that revealed the questions and anxieties that the beginning teachers had as they struggled to choose lessons that exemplified their social justice ideals.

The research team analyzed the data using a common set of codes that we generated in class, as well as further codes that we created based on each individual case. We viewed each beginning teacher's conceptions of social justice and connected those conceptions to her classroom practices. Using narrative inquiry (Ershler, 2001; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), each researcher created a curriculum

vignette based on her classroom observations and the interviews that she conducted with her participant. The vignettes were typically two to three pages long and they included descriptions of the social justice lessons that the researchers observed, as well as analyses of how those lessons represented the teachers' social justice conceptions in motion. The vignettes were shared with teachers as a way of conducting member-checks to insure that the researchers had accurately captured each teacher's enactment and conceptions of social justice. In addition, each of the teacher participants received a book of curriculum vignettes at the close of the project. Ultimately, the purpose of the vignettes was to emphasize the importance of the work that the teachers were doing and to provide each participant with a collection of social justice lesson ideas that they might use in the future in their classrooms. We hoped that these narratives might in turn promote dialogue among our beginning teacher participants, that these vignettes would broaden each teacher's conceptions of social justice curriculum, and that the process of naming and reflecting upon social justice would aid our participants in developing and articulating their practice.

After pooling and analyzing the data from our three teacher participants, the authors of this paper found a complex constellation of beliefs, commitments, and avoidances that have implications for teacher education, professional development, and qualitative research methods alike. The beginning teachers with whom we collaborated worked in various ways to engage their students in critiques of social injustices and to enable them to work against those injustices in both their classrooms and their lives.

IN SEARCH OF NEW TEACHERS ENACTING SOCIAL JUSTICE CURRICULA

Why Examine New Teachers' Social Justice Curricula and Their Successes?

In this inquiry, we focused on new educators, defining them as teachers who have less than three years of teaching experience. Much of the literature on new, novice, and beginning teachers has reported the concerns and problems they encounter during the early years of teaching. Their difficulties have been referred to as survival and discovery (Feiman-Nemser, 1983), "sink or swim" (Lortie, 1975; Varah, Theune, & Parker, 1986) "trial by fire" (Pataniczek & Isaacson, 1981), and "lost at sea" (Kauffman, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Peske, 2002). We know from the literature that such struggles can arise because of a mismatch between beginning teachers' unrealistic expectations and the reality of schools (Corcoran, 1981; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Howey & Zimpher, 1999; Lacey, 1977; Lortie, 1975; Veenman, 1984), the overwhelming amount and variety of duties that they are expected to perform at school (Worthy, 2005), a lack of support and guidance (Flores, 2006), and personal

concerns about acceptance, control and adequacy (Kagan, 1990; Ryan, 1970). While there is a growing body of literature on beginning teachers' success, it is relatively small compared to their stories of struggle as illustrated in the portrayals of new teachers above. This fact, coupled with our project goals to support and address the needs of educators who teach for social justice, fueled our desire to catalogue their stories of successful social justice curricular enactments.

Why Consider New Teacher Backgrounds in Our Research on Social Justice Curricula?

Stories of teaching success call for an exploration of personal background. Britzman (1991) wrote that learning to teach “is a time when one’s past, present, and future are set in dynamic tension” (p. 8). She and other authors maintain that a teacher’s background, her prior attitudes, and her conceptions all work to profoundly influence her philosophy of teaching and the ways that she approaches the diverse group of students in her classroom. A number of authors (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Clark & Yinger, 1987; Pajares, 1992) point to a teacher’s personal values and beliefs as indicators of the approach she will take to teaching. They contend that these values work to shape teachers’ educational methods as well as the stance that they take toward their students. Benyon (1985) and Knowles (1992) examine the importance of prior beliefs in preservice teachers in particular, examining the ways that those beliefs help to form preservice teachers’ thinking as well as their future practice. In his case study of an emerging social justice educator, Cantor (2002) demonstrated that a teacher’s background and personal experiences, along with her preservice program and her current teaching, all play a role in her commitments to social justice and the ways that she chooses to enact social justice within her classroom. As such, we embed each teacher’s curriculum in the context of her narrated beliefs and personal history surrounding social justice, and turn to examine how personal background and curriculum planning come into play in classroom and school contexts.

Why Look at New Teacher Social Justice Conceptions “In Practice?”

It can be tempting, when discussing ideas abstractly, to maintain a level of distance from the shape that those ideas might take in practice. Many teacher-researchers express verbal commitments to social justice pedagogy, yet for educators interested in bridging the theory practice gap, contributing to the small body of literature on social justice curricula, and facilitating teaching that impacts educators and youth, it is crucial to explore social justice teaching in action across distinct classrooms and school sites.

In the literature on teaching for social justice, teacher-researchers differ in their *approaches* to social justice pedagogy, the *areas* of curricular content that they explore, and the *lenses* through which they judge their effectiveness as social justice pedagogues. To illustrate, McCall (2004) used poetry to promote nonthreatening dialogue and self-reflection, Goss (2005) challenged students to consider how everyday choices like buying ice cream at lunch time marginalized classmates, and Monkman, MacGillivray, and Leyva (2003) illustrated how one teacher's literacy teaching practices promoted teacher/student shared decision-making as she honored student cultures in discussion of relevant community issues and sang songs chosen by students. Some employed literary content (McCall, 2004), as others infused social justice pedagogy across content areas, sometimes beyond academic curriculum (Goss, 2005) or coupled it with shared classroom governance (Monkman et al., 2003). While each educator judged her effectiveness as a social justice pedagogue, Goss (2005) did so by highlighting patterns in student work and data from parent surveys through the *Teachers for Social Justice* framework for social justice education while McCall (2004) and Monkman et al. (2003) listed classroom routines and student/teacher communication as evidence of social justice teaching.

What we learn glimpsing these educators' ideals in motion is that without a careful look at beliefs in practice, new educators and teacher educators will miss the subtle communications and daily feedback teachers garner to reflect on their practice, refine, and define successful social justice curriculum enactments. Therefore, we offer the following three vignettes of new teachers' social justice curriculum in practice.

Vignettes of New Teachers' Social Justice Conceptions and Curriculum in Practice

There have been some attempts to document how teachers conceptualize teaching for social justice and how they enact social justice curriculum in the classroom (e.g., Bondy & McKenzie, 1999; Cantor, 2002; Damico, Ridle, Green, & Yeager, 2004; Kelly & Brandes, 2001). However, such studies tended to overlook teachers' personal and professional backgrounds (e.g., Bondy & McKenzie, 1999), contextual complexities in enacting curriculum as a beginning teacher (e.g., Kelly & Brandes, 2001), or they focused on just one teacher (e.g., Cantor, 2002; Damico, Riddle, Green, & Yeager, 2004).

To build on and further this small body of literature on new teachers' social justice conceptions in and out of practice, we juxtapose the following three vignettes. Each explores one beginning teacher's conception of social justice curriculum in practice, in context, and in motion, integrating observations, interviews, and follow-up reflections from the teacher's emic perspective. By considering each teacher's beliefs, personal and professional experience, in school

and classroom context, we hope to illustrate some of the myriad ways early career teachers can successfully teach social justice in school amidst the broad range of factors that come into play when we put our verbal ideals into practice.

STANDPOINTS, SOCIAL STUDIES, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ALISON'S CLASSROOM

Background

At the time of this study, Alison, a young fifth grade teacher, was in her second year of teaching at a Brooklyn Public School. She related that a passion for the issues, literature, and beauty of urban America coupled with three years teaching adult ESL in Japan brought her to her current conceptions of teaching for social justice.

During the first meeting, Alison encouraged the researcher to come watch a social justice lesson “any time” because components of social justice permeated her teaching throughout the day. Social justice practices she identified in her class were: community circle and the examination of standards-based content from multiple perspectives. She explained that in community circle, students expressed their opinions, voted, talked, apologized, and in the end developed a thriving classroom community. Outside this circle, students engaged in “productive arguments” about literary and social studies content:

I think in my class, and I think in general, you should hear different points of view like you might hear the kids arguing, like in a productive way, but arguing with each other about their ideas.... They don't have to come to an agreement, but that they're building off of each other. (AI, 04/04/06, p. 1–2)

Alison explained the ethical, pedagogical, and curricular dilemmas inherent in integrating social justice objectives in classroom curricula. Ethically, she felt compelled to facilitate critical conversations surrounding socioeconomic and sexual differences, but was concerned that such conversations made some students feel “singled out or bad.” Pedagogically, Alison realized how easy it was for kids to adopt “the teacher's agenda” (AI, 03/07/06, p. 8). Constraints lay in all the preparation required to lay the groundwork for students to see the complexity in social and political problems. For example, she wanted to ensure that historical events like the Civil War wouldn't get reduced to simple equations like: North = good, South = bad, because slavery = wrong? From a curricular standpoint Alison struggled with content mandates that prevented the use of the social justice units she had developed as a preservice teacher (AI, 04/04/06). She instead crafted her own social justice social studies units, aligned to grade level content standards, along with other fifth grade teachers at her school. The social justice social studies units Alison and her colleagues designed were (1) aligned with grade level content

standards and (2) scaffolded students to examine historical events from multiple perspectives. But Alison pointed to the dearth of historical texts from diverse perspectives. For example, her search for Mexican, Asian, and female voices on Western Expansion yielded few texts – a factor that may contribute to myopic understandings of history (AI, 4/4/2006).

Curriculum Enactment

Circumscribed within the above constraints, Alison conducted two “curriculum enactments,” (i.e., lessons in action or learning events co-constructed by students and their teacher) during the observation period (1) an end of the unit Western Expansion (or Contraction!) Extravaganza and (2) a text-based social studies lesson on the Civil War, both part of longer units on the historical time periods.

Five weeks of research had culminated in a Western Expansion Extravaganza where the whole class donned homemade costumes (rustled up from clothes and props they found around home) and gathered to hear one another speak from the vantage points of historical figures. Students spoke as Nat Love (an African American cowboy), Chief Joseph (a famous Native American leader), and Rachel Donelson Jackson (Andrew Jackson’s wife), to name a few. Some shared about the lives they had led, others drew conclusions about Westward Expansion from their figure’s point of view, and characters bantered back and forth about their decisions, whereabouts, and the ramifications of their actions (with a little moderating by Alison).

The second enactment was one of the initial lessons in their new Civil War unit. In previous social studies lessons, Alison introduced some debates between the North and South. Students had started reading a chapter from a textbook: “Chapter 10: The North and South, 1820–1860.” The text covered some of the economic, cultural, legal, and political events that took place in the decades prior to the Civil War.

To begin, students sat together on the rug to “stop and jot” and “turn and talk” about their personal definitions of conflict and compromise and review the previous day’s Civil War reading. Alison asked them to read portions of the text in small groups and compose responses to the following questions: (1) “What forces divided the nation?” (2) “What compromises were attempted?” Following twenty minutes in small groups, the class reconvened on the rug to collaboratively develop answers to the initial questions on chart paper. After debriefing, Alison sent small groups off to consider “Was the civil war necessary?” Each cluster was to reach a consensus and compose one written response to the question—an activity that would require students to experience dialogic conflict and compromise.

Later, groups circled on the rug to share their decisions and summarize their dialogic process. For homework, Alison asked students to journal on their small

group conflicts, compromises, and opinions about the Civil War's necessity. In community circle, Alison planned to have students talk about different issues that arose when opinions clashed and groups had to compromise, in the hopes of connecting this personal compromise experience to political compromises during the Civil War.

Discussion

Curriculum enactments observed in Alison's classroom mirrored her definitions of social justice teaching as they integrated community circle, fostered "productive arguments," and explored social studies and literary issues from multiple perspectives. Debriefing small group conflict and compromise about the Civil War's necessity demonstrated one of many ways Alison utilized community circle to promote student expression in her classroom. Student debates on the Civil War's necessity and interactive performances from historical figures' experiences of Western Expansion fostered "productive arguments" and brought multiple perspectives to two time periods state curriculum standards required fifth graders to explore. The development of both units required a great deal of time to prepare, collective staff commitment to consider multiple perspectives, and teacher research to locate historical accounts from voices seldom considered. But slowly Alison scaffolded her students to consider the diverse stances people bring to historical and classroom events, past and present.

HELPING OTHERS HELPS OURSELVES: LUCY'S CURRICULUM

Background

Lucy, who is hearing, and Aaron, who is deaf, co-taught in a bilingual public elementary school in which both deaf and hearing students learned in English and American Sign Language (ASL). Although in certain classrooms the deaf teacher, "seem[ed] to play the role of the assistant" (LI, 3/10/06, p. 6), in their classroom, Lucy and Aaron equally shared authority and instructional time. In addition, Lucy and Aaron were adamant that all students have access to the language that others are using and therefore they strictly used ASL during whole-group activities.

The two teachers valued their students' contributions and opinions and they fostered a great deal of debate in their classroom. They did not push what they considered to be important conversations aside in order to attend to mandated curricula. Lucy described classroom discussions: "We don't ignore issues that happen in the classroom...it can last all afternoon and it ends up being a really good conversation and sometimes...it was worth it. And I think it helps them" (LI, 3/10/2006, p. 4).

Both Lucy and Aaron were committed to preparing their students for a future that would most likely prove challenging. Because most of their students were deaf, students of color, or both, “social justice” issues held a sense of immediacy. Aaron was a deaf man and Lucy was a black woman of Haitian descent. Both used their own experiences with injustice and discrimination in order to help prepare their students for the often difficult world that would await them. Lucy explained, “We have a lot of discussions and I ask them if they have any experiences not being treated fairly and I tell them my own experiences and my team teacher Aaron also does” (LI, 3/10/2006, p. 2). Their outlook was both pragmatic and positive: they sought to foster an awareness of the hardships that their students would likely encounter in the “real world” so that they could help these students better navigate that world and advocate for themselves.

While Lucy felt strongly that issues of justice be integrated into her curriculum and interactions with students, a multitude of obstacles made such a goal difficult to enact. During the observation, Lucy was in her first year of teaching, an experience she described as frustrating and often exhausting. Moreover, many of her fifth grade students had spent years with teachers who expected them to do very little because they were deaf. Therefore, Lucy was teaching students whose skills were years behind those of their peers. In addition, Lucy also spent a great deal of her time preparing students for standardized tests and teaching mandated curricula. She laughed, “We *try* to have discussions... There are just so many things that come up... I know there should be no excuses, but we don’t always get to discuss what we write about or wrote about. But we try to” (LI, 3/10/2006, p. 3). This sentiment was one that Lucy repeated often and was one of the attributes that helped her to successfully enact a social justice framework even in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Ultimately, her constraints were unable to stop her from creating a classroom environment in which social justice and responsibility were central.

Curriculum Enactment

Lucy’s enactment of her social justice ideals came in the form of the Robin Hood Project, a student-generated service learning project and fundraiser. The project was inspired by *Penny Harvest*, a national child-driven philanthropy program that encourages students to create community service projects in their own schools and to raise money to support communities in need. Lucy and Aaron began their project by having students vote on the issue that most concerned them. The students chose homelessness and they subsequently designed a multifaceted project to raise money for homeless organizations and to increase awareness of homelessness in their school community. They collected pennies from classrooms throughout the school and wrote letters to companies to ask for further contributions. The project culminated in a school-wide assembly in which students from Lucy and Aaron’s

class educated their peers about homelessness and presented the money that they had raised to a local organization.

The project motivated students in countless ways. Lucy and Aaron initiated honest conversations about homelessness and they connected the project to various other topics within their academic curricula, making previously mundane topics come alive for the students. They saw a marked change in many students' academic skills as well as in their levels of motivation.

Perhaps even more importantly, the Robin Hood Project taught students important life skills that would help them to navigate within a hearing world that is often disabling. In an interview, Lucy commented, "I want them to just wake up and realize that it's a hard world out there. Especially because you're deaf" (LI, 3/10/2006, p. 1). Through the Robin Hood project, Lucy, Aaron, and their students turned this ominous prognosis into positive action. Through their fundraising and their all-school assembly, students acted as role models for their fellow students, deaf and hearing alike. The project not only helped the students to see the hard world ahead, but it gave them the skills and confidence to prepare for and thrive within that world. They learned that they could be agents of change and that their disabilities did not ultimately have to hinder their successes.

Discussion

The success that Lucy and Aaron experienced in implementing a social justice curriculum was due in large part to a sense of social justice that was both personal and urgent. It was crucial to Lucy that she prepared her fifth graders for the "real world" that they would soon encounter. As such, she insisted that her students engage in scenarios that would bring them in contact with that world and she made sure to scaffold them and build their confidence as she did so.

Lucy also made issues of social justice a priority in her classroom. She explained, "sometimes I feel like I don't get any stuff done like reading or writing because something always happens and I don't feel comfortable just continuing whatever I'm doing" (LI, 3/10/2006, p. 3). In this way she was able to gain perspective with regards to the obstacles, such as standardized curricula, that many teachers feel stifled by – taking and making time she considered necessary.

Lucy and Aaron were not satisfied with a project in which students were merely giving to the homeless. They wanted the project to be a catalyst, something that forced students to notice what was going on in the world around them. And, this act of looking *outward* ultimately insured that each of their students gained personal and *internal* growth. By helping others through the Robin Hood Project, the students helped themselves in countless ways. They built their self-confidence, bolstered their ability to think and act on their own, and learned to negotiate within a world that is often disabling. Their experiences have instilled in them abilities and traits that they will likely retain and will hopefully build upon in years to come.

WEAVING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO TEACHING PRACTICE IN NORA'S ROOM

Background

Nora and Susan taught a second grade inclusion classroom in a large public elementary school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Both Nora and Susan were new teachers. In spite of affluent resources and supportive administrators, Nora was still hesitant about her ability to teach for social justice. Her class was extremely diverse, and most of her students were either immigrants or children of immigrants. Of her 19 students, 9 were labeled with disabilities. Her class was also economically diverse: five students lived in housing projects and received free school lunches, while she identified two students as upper-class. In addition, Nora had to negotiate a balance between providing students with choice time and teaching basic skills. She had learned the importance of choice time when she was a student teacher. Yet, she understood that children needed to learn basic skills, especially in New York City, where promotion was based on test scores.

As a second-generation child of Russian immigrants, Nora encountered negative experiences herself in school. Her desire to create different experiences for students brought her to pursue a teaching degree. Her preservice program had helped her articulate her social justice ideals more clearly and her teaching experiences further refined those ideas. With a memory of “walking a tightrope between Russian and American culture” (NI, 09/28/2006, p. 2), she constantly thought about how home language and culture impacted students’ learning and how she could honor where they came from while also acknowledging their new culture. In addition, for Nora, teaching for social justice was not just about teaching lessons; it was about how people are treated:

[Teaching for social justice] is not about getting outside and pointing to it, but it’s about really reflecting on everything you do and thinking about it and making it sure that you make conscious decisions—everything from the books you read out loud to children you call on. (NI, 03/21/2006, p. 1)

Curriculum Enactment

Because of Nora’s belief that social justice must pervade every aspect of one’s teaching, it was difficult to pinpoint specific social justice lessons in her classroom. Her social justice paradigm was embedded in her daily classroom practices and for this project we chose to focus on her community-building exercises, as well as her efforts to encourage her students to respect themselves and others, speak without fear, and take responsibility for their actions.

One day, there had been a fight during lunch in which one student was teasing the other. When they got back to the classroom, Nora asked students to think about how they would feel if another person laughed at them. Then she began a whole-class discussion about what would demonstrate respectful behavior in such a situation. During the discussion, she emphasized to students that “YOU are responsible for yourself, for the choices that you make.” (NO, 02/23/06, p. 6) Then she asked the class if anyone had seen people in the yard or at the lunch tables who respected the rule, “respect yourself, supplies, and your learning” which was introduced at the beginning of the year and hung on the front wall of the classroom.

After the discussion, Nora and Susan turned to a writing workshop, and students wrote about the things that made them wonder in the books they were reading. During the individual writing activity, Nora and Susan checked in on students and then began their one-on-one writing conferences; they read students work and asked guiding questions to help them go further, and encouraged students to speak about their writing. During this process, they emphasized the importance of expressing ideas freely. They then moved on to a book club workshop. An important component of the workshop was an accountability sheet, which students used at the end of the workshop, to evaluate their own participation and to reflect upon what they discussed.

Discussion

Nora perceived social justice as pedagogy and paradigm rather than as content. This was partially based on her concern that some teachers considered social justice lessons to be separate from the rest of the curriculum: “When we say social justice lesson, it could be very harmful because a teacher could have said that ‘I’ll read about Martin Luther King. That’s a social justice lesson’ ” (NI, 02/19/06, p. 3). On the contrary, Nora’s own teaching demonstrated her belief that social justice must permeate a teacher’s entire pedagogy. As seen above, Nora emphasized that respecting oneself is a basic step for respecting others which is in turn a basic step for building a community. Therefore, Nora continuously praised students’ good behavior and efforts and did not miss teachable moments. When students did not follow a key classroom rule, she was sure to interrupt her scheduled curriculum to address the issue.

Second, speaking without fear was another important thing for Nora. She used literacy workshops to bolster students’ voices, encouraging them to reflect upon their lives and examine their values rather than censoring themselves. For this reason, Nora did not point out grammatical or spelling mistakes during writing workshop but rather focused on students’ content and thinking. She used morning meeting time to have students revise their sentences through a shared writing activity. In addition, she encouraged disagreement among students. She wanted

them “[to] learn how to disagree with people. And book clubs are a great way to do that because you have something tangible. We all have really different ideas about the book. I can love the book and my partner can hate that book. And we can say why” (NI, 03/21/06, p. 4).

Nora also emphasized the importance of taking responsibility for one’s own choices in teaching for social justice. She strongly believed that students should understand where we are in history and that it is “really important to help [students] recognize who they are today and how the choices they make impact other people” (NI, 02/19/06, p. 4). Through the book club accountability sheet, they learned their responsibilities to the group. In this way, they were accountable to each other, not to the teachers. “If they don’t come ready to talk and they’re not good listeners, that is something that affects the group. We can coach them on it but it’s something they need to help one another” (NI, 03/21/06, p. 2). Helping students respect oneself, speak without fear, and take responsibility for one’s own choices was Nora’s way of teaching for social justice.

SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCEPTIONS AND CURRICULA IN CONVERSATION

As a means of navigating the gap between theory and practice, Merrett (2004) found it useful to “articulate a working definition of social justice,” arguing that “social justice” is “a constellation of terms” (p. 93–94). Similarly, in this paper we have offered a “constellation” of curriculum enactments to develop a working vision of social justice teaching in practice. In doing so, we learned that curriculum mandates, school planning structures, teacher and student lived experiences, social and political school and city issues, and co-teaching arrangements all contributed to the enactment of social justice curriculum for these particular teachers. For example, in Alison’s school, grade level teams co-planned social justice units with a shared goal of examining multiple perspectives on history. While Alison brought personal history and graduate learning experience to this school context, her colleagues’ ideals, her students, and a mandated curriculum interacted to produce the enactment detailed here. All three new educators’ conceptions and enactments of social justice were inevitably altered as they engaged in the practice of teaching and will no doubt continue to change the longer they remain in the classroom.

Each teacher’s definition of social justice is itself a “working definition,” constantly “in the making” as factors visible and invisible shape lessons and their effects. As enacted in this paper, Alison’s decisions to adhere to mandated curriculum contrasted sharply with Lucy’s voiced commitment to put planned curriculum aside as a means to deal with the issues that arose in her classroom. Nora echoed Lucy’s focus on social justice content that emerged from student school issues in class and on the playground. However, Lucy’s Robin Hood project pushed her social justice

teaching commitment outside of the classroom and the realm of students' personal lives that Alison, and Nora centered, to underscore the obligation she felt students had to homeless people who live on New York City streets. In fact, these teachers' curriculum enactments represent a "constellation" of content, ideology, and practice that might appear different if we were to return to their classrooms today, tomorrow, or twenty years from now. What is most important is that teachers and educational researchers interested in social justice curriculum continue to put these definitional terms into practice, put their visions into action, take time to systematically examine these theories in motion in classroom moments, and realize their agency in the realm of educating for social justice; for it is precisely action and motion that make a definition "work."

SOCIAL JUSTICE CONCEPTIONS AND CURRICULA "IN THE MAKING"

With this call to put definitions "to work," we encourage teachers, both novice and veteran, to consider their own conceptions of social justice and how they differ from or parallel the enacted conceptions above. Taking time to step outside of classroom practice and record personal constructs of social justice in word, print, or sketch, could provide documentation to revisit over time, as a means to explore how one's own definition evolves through time and is influenced by personal experience. It might also be useful to ponder the ways in which one's conceptions of social justice are affected by the practice of teaching, or what moments of social justice curriculum in one's classroom actually look like. When a teacher compares her idealized views of social justice with the forms of social justice that she enacts on a daily basis in her classroom, she may be better able to determine what situational factors (both personal or site-based) might be worked around, against, or with to enact social justice curriculum more effectively.

We also call upon administrators and those in charge of allocating and distributing school time, space, materials, and professional development to consider the factors that both inhibited and supported the social justice enactments above. For example, administrators at Alison's school site provided time and clear vision to facilitate grade-level planning of a fifth grade social studies curriculum from multiple perspectives. At the same time, administrators also might support teacher decisions like those exercised by Nora and Lucy who both pointed to the necessity of putting mandated curricula aside to make time to teach when specific classroom, school, and social issues arose. Like teachers, administrators might benefit from articulating their own conceptions of social justice and comparing them with their daily school experiences. They might then be better equipped to ask how they can work to grow their schools into places in which social justice curriculum is a part of staff vision and action.

Finally, we underscore the need for educational researchers and teachers of higher education to also engage in analyzing and articulating their own conceptions of social justice. But, most importantly, we caution readers against using the enactments above as a road map for social justice curriculum, for these are individual moments in which beginning teachers verbalized their conceptions and attempted to put them into play in their classroom. It is certain that these teachers, in different times and spaces, would enact social justice curricula in very different ways than is evident in the above illustrations. The function of a working definition of social justice is not to decide which enactment is more worthy or laudable. Rather, it is to demonstrate that social justice is an active and malleable concept that can and should transform depending on circumstance and context. So too, these notions can lend a sense of self-assurance and empowerment to beginning teachers, who are often stymied by the fear that their own attempts at social justice curriculum enactments are insufficient. By envisioning social justice as a concept that is “in the making,” new educators may be able to see their own attempts as both adequate and worthy and they may in turn take more risks and make more efforts to bring social justice into all aspects of their classrooms and curricula.

REFERENCES

- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Syracuse, NY: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bondy, E., & McKenzie, J. (1999). Resilience building and social reconstructionist teaching: A first-year teacher's story. *The Elementary School Journal*, 100(2), 130–150.
- Cantor, J. (2002). Who's teaching the urban poor? Supporting an emerging social justice educator in a professional development school. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 35(3), 225–235.
- Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2001). Beyond certainty: Taking an inquiry stance on practice. In A. Lieberman & L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters* (pp. 45–58). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Corcoran, E. (1981). Transition shock: The beginning teacher's paradox. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 19–23.
- Damico, J., Riddle, R. L., Green, J., & Yeager, B. (2004). From answers to questions: A beginning teacher learns to teach for social justice. *Language Arts*, 82(1), 36–46.
- Ershler, A. R. (2001). The narrative as an experience text: Writing themselves back in. In A. Lieberman and L. Miller (Eds.), *Teachers caught in the action: Professional development that matters* (pp. 159–173). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Feiman-Nemser, S. (1983). Learning to teach. In L. S. Shulman & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Handbook of teaching and policy* (pp. 150–170). New York: Longman.
- Flores, M. A. (2006). Being a novice teacher in two different settings: Struggles, continuities, and discontinuities. *Teachers College Record*, 108(10), 2021–2052.

- Goss, L. (2005). *Learning to be a good guy: Teaching for social justice in the primary classroom*. Retrieved September 26, 2006, from <http://www.teachersnetwork.org/tnl/research/achieve/Goss.pdf>
- Howey, K. R., & Zimpher, L. L. (1999). Pervasive problems and issues in teacher education. In G. A. Griffin (Ed.), *The education of teachers* (pp. 279–305). Chicago: NSSE: University of Chicago Press.
- Kagan, D. M. (1990). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62(2), 129–169.
- Kauffman, D., Johnson, S. M., Kardos, S. M., Liu, E., & Peske, H. G. (2002). “Lost at sea”: New teachers’ experiences with curriculum and assessment. *Teachers College Record*, 104(2), 273–300.
- Kelly, D., & Brandes, G. (2001) Shifting out of neutral: Beginning teachers’ struggles with teaching for social justice. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26(4), 437–454
- Reinhartz, S. (1992). *Feminist methods in social research*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lacey, C. (1977). *The socialization of teachers*. London: Methuen.
- Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
- McCall, A. (2004). Using poetry in social studies classes to teach about cultural diversity and social justice. *Social Studies*, 95(4), 172.
- McDonald, J. P. (1992). *Teaching : making sense of an uncertain craft*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Monkman, K., MacGillivray, L., & Leyva, C. H., (2003). Literacy on three planes: Infusing social justice and culture into classroom instruction. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 27(2), 245–258.
- Pataniczek, D., & Isaacson, N. S. (1981). The relationship of socialization and the concerns of beginning teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 32(3), 14–17.
- Ryan, K. (1970). *Don’t smile until Christmas: Accounts of the first year of teaching*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Varah, L. J., Theune, W. S., & Parker, L. (1986). Beginning teachers: Sink or swim? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(1), 30–34.
- Veenman, S. (1984). Perceived problems of beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 54(2), 143–178.
- Wasser, J. D., & Bresler, L. (1996). Working in the interpretive zone: Conceptualizing collaboration in qualitative research teams. *Educational Researcher*, 25(5), 5–15.
- Williams, L. R. (1996). Does practice lead theory? Teachers’ constructs about teaching: Bottom-up perspectives. In J. A. Chafel & S. Reifel (Eds.), *Advances in early education and day care* (Vol. 8, pp. 153–184). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Worthy, J. (2005). “It didn’t have to be so hard”: The first years of teaching in an urban school. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 18(3), 379–398.