

Teaching for Social Justice: Veteran High School Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract

Widely appealing, the phrase *teaching for social justice* masks contested definitions, which, if left unaddressed, can undermine efforts to translate concern for social justice into practice. Yet there is little research recording and analyzing what teachers are actually saying and doing when teaching for social justice. The study described in this article—interviews with 20 veteran high school English and social studies teachers committed to teaching for social justice—aims to begin filling this gap. We analyze the diverse ways that the veterans defined social justice and discuss the possibilities and challenges they encountered.

Introduction

Recently, talk of “social justice” has re-entered conversations about public school teaching (e.g., Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Christensen, 2000; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Connell, 1993; Darling-Hammond, French & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Gale & Densmore, 2000; MacKinnon, 2000). Often, social justice is not defined explicitly, and when it is, the definitions are theoretical and varied. Explicit accounts of what teaching for social justice looks like in practice are sparse, and those that exist draw most of their examples from inner-city schools in the United States where African American or Latino students form a majority (e.g., Sylvester, 1994). In Vancouver, British Columbia, as in many urban centers in Canada, schools typically serve students from many different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the challenges of teaching for social justice are particular to

these circumstances. The aim of this exploratory study was to interview 20 veteran teachers in Vancouver about what teaching for social justice means to them and how a concern for social justice informs their classroom practices.

Taking a Stand

There are, of course, diverse ways of thinking about teaching for social justice, some of which we discuss below as we map the perspectives of the veteran teachers in our study. Broadly speaking, sociologists of education in the United States, going back to James Coleman (1968), have linked justice to the concept of equality of educational opportunity, variously defined as: (a) equality of access to the school system, (b) equality of treatment within school, (c) equality of learning outcomes, or (d) equality of results (e.g., equal access to life chances as adults). More recently, Gale and Densmore (2000) have categorized these perspectives as “retributive” (equality of access) and “(re)distributive” (equality of treatment, learning outcomes, and results). Drawing from feminist theories of social justice (Fraser, 1997; Young, 1990), Gale and Densmore have added the category of “recognitive” justice to underscore the importance of recognizing “differences *and* areas of commonality among cultural groups” (Gale & Densmore, 2000, p. 18, emphasis in original). The recognitive approach to social justice calls upon teachers to attend, for example, to “oppressive institutional processes that inhibit the development of their students” (p. 21).

Our own position (following Fraser, 1997) is that social justice is both a matter of redistribution as well as recognition. Who gets how much schooling is still an important issue. The kind of education that children receive—and who decides—is equally vital. More specifically, our perspective on teaching for social justice encompasses three main elements:

- (a) critical analysis of social and institutional inequities; (b) commitment to “principled action to achieve social justice, not only for those around but for strangers” (Greene, 1998, p. xxxiii); and (c) willingness to question one’s own understanding of social justice, in part through listening to alternative perspectives. (Kelly & Brandes, 2001)

Each of these elements relates centrally to the idea of taking a stand. The first involves an assessment of who benefits and who loses in the maintenance of the status quo. Such a critical analysis of the various inequities bound up in the current state of affairs prompts teachers to be cognizant of the political nature of many of the pedagogical choices they make daily. If teachers are awake to these choices and how they contribute to a vision of what they hope to accomplish, then these choices can be said to comprise a position that teachers are prepared to defend.

Taking a stand is not just about an analysis or words, however; the phrase provides a useful reminder that we are embodied and called upon, by the strength of our convictions, to put our bodies on the line, to take action. To draw students’

attention to the socially situated nature of all knowledge claims (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991, chap. 9) and to the political interests embedded in the formal and informal curriculum is to risk a reaction from those with a stake in the inequitable status quo. Aware of the risk they take, teachers may feel a surge of adrenaline; in more extreme instances, they may fear for their job. Nevertheless, teachers committed to teaching for social justice need to take principled action. They also need to work to create classrooms where their students can think about where they stand on social issues and what they might do to ameliorate suffering and inequities among groups of people with whom they are familiar as well as those with whom they have had little or no contact.

At the same time, teachers committed to teaching for social justice should not let their analysis, words, or actions congeal into new orthodoxies. In this context, taking a stand means questioning one's own past beliefs and actions and being open to alternative perspectives. Such self-examination may lead teachers to risk offending people with whom they have been allied in the past, and yet this reflexivity is crucial. It can remind teachers that they themselves "are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change" (Ellsworth, 1989, p. 310).

Context of the Study

The first two authors are engaged in an ongoing, qualitative self-study of the successes and challenges of the Humanities and Social Justice Teacher Education Program (HSJTTEP) at the University of British Columbia, which we helped to co-found in 1998. Data for this article come from hour-long, semi-structured interviews with 20 veteran teachers, each of whom either asked us to use their real name or selected their own pseudonym. The third author, a high school social studies teacher of 17 years as well as a doctoral candidate, conducted 12 of the 20 interviews and was himself interviewed. About half of the participants had served as school advisors to HSTTEP student teachers and had volunteered to be interviewed. To round out the group of participants, we also informally sought nominations from equity-minded teachers, teacher union activists, a former school board trustee, and a high school student. We limited the sample to teachers in Vancouver public secondary schools, particularly those specializing in English or social studies, with at least 5 years of teaching experience. While not a selection criterion per se, we aimed for as much diversity as possible by sex, "race," sexuality, and school. The final group of participants was composed of 10 men and 10 women; 17 were European Canadian (White), 1 was Aboriginal, 1 was Afro-Caribbean Canadian, and 1 was Arab and European Canadian; 1 mentioned being gay, 1 lesbian, and the rest were assumed to be heterosexual. They had taught from 5 to 35 years (the median years of teaching was 12 and the average was 17) and were employed at ten different schools, all but three of which were located in predominantly working-class or high-poverty neighborhoods.

Schools in British Columbia are not funded based on local property taxes as they are in the United States, and officially designated inner-city schools typically receive extra government funding. While inequities arise (e.g., due to the different fundraising capacity of parent groups), the sharp disparities evident in the United States between inner-city schools and those located in middle-class neighborhoods (see, e.g., Kozol, 1991) are not present in cities like Vancouver. As a result, veteran teachers do not eschew working in Vancouver's inner-city schools. Indeed, many prefer it because they feel they can make a bigger difference in the lives of their students.

Regardless of the socio-economic status of the surrounding neighborhoods, the schools where our participants taught were linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse. Veteran teachers in inner-city schools had the most diverse classes, with students speaking over 40 different home languages. One such veteran contrasted his Vancouver teaching experience with the Black/White or Latino/White binary underlying many anti-racist educational resources produced in the United States until fairly recently. "There isn't a majority/minority here. There isn't a top dog/underdog. There is a stratification . . . but it's complex, and there is mobility within it. There is enough true diversity that the kids get used to differences very quickly." Although schools in Vancouver are multiracial rather than bi-racial, the socially dominant curriculum remains Eurocentric, and institutional and interpersonal racism are still present, as evidenced by the anecdotes that our participants shared (discussed below).

In this article, we map the diverse meanings of social justice articulated by veteran teachers in the context of high school social studies and English. We provide a brief catalogue of the ways they translated their visions into classroom practices. We then provide a descriptive analysis of three sets of challenges that the veteran teachers encountered while attempting to teach for social justice. As a frame for discussion of these definitions and challenges, we distinguish between liberal and critical (or radical) perspectives. A number of critical scholars have used the concept of ideology to distinguish among teacher attitudes and competing visions of multicultural education (e.g., Sleeter & Grant, 1994; Sleeter, 1996; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Solomon & Allen, 2001). As this scholarship has shown, liberal teachers put more emphasis on valuing diversity for its own sake (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, p. 15), on affirming students as individuals, and on changing people's unjust beliefs and behavior. By contrast, critical teachers assume that social structures, including the undemocratic and unequal economic sphere of society, must also change. Thus, they "argue that individuals need to learn to organize and work collectively in order to bring about social changes that are larger than individuals" (Sleeter & Grant, 1994, pp. 212, 213).

How the Teachers Defined Social Justice

Our experiences teaching and supervising student teachers in Vancouver's secondary schools, combined with Paul Orłowski's interviews with social studies

department heads in Vancouver (analysis in progress), suggest that a fair number of secondary teachers, teacher leaders, and school administrators subscribe to a conservative perspective that values competitive individualism and social hierarchies (see Sleeter, 1996, chap. 3). This is important to keep in mind as we explore the perspectives of the veteran teachers committed to social justice, many of whom could be described as progressive. “Progressive visions [encompassing left liberal to radical or critical perspectives] tend to view the schools as central to solving social problems, as a vehicle for upward mobility, as essential to the development of individual potential, and as an integral part of a democratic society” (Sadovnik, Cookson & Semel, 1994, pp. 27-28).

We asked participants such questions as how they tried to create an inclusive and respectful teaching and learning environment, what they meant by social justice, whether teaching for social justice differed from good teaching, and if so, how. As anticipated, the veteran teachers conceived of teaching for social justice in a variety of ways. The views expressed clustered within either a liberal or critical perspective on society in general and on education in particular.

Typologies, by their very nature, oversimplify phenomena. In this study, we have not assumed that most people have a coherent politics that they apply consistently to every aspect of their lives (see Lakoff, 1996). A teacher might, within the span of an interview and depending on the issue under discussion, express views that we as researchers would classify variously as conservative, liberal, or critical. In our study, for example, a few teachers espoused and practiced a more critical politics outside school, but their educational philosophy seemed more liberal. We speculate that, given the political realities of working in public schools with school-age children, this difference may be a strategic, pragmatic, or pedagogical one.

This caveat about our typology notwithstanding, at one end of the ideological spectrum, an English teacher confessed that social justice, which he associated with “capitalism versus socialism,” was not his “bag.” Apart from eschewing the label of social justice, however, his views accorded with a liberal group of teachers who emphasized the importance of, as Mr. Gellard put it, working to “maintain a safe environment where students can try out ideas,” however controversial. This liberal group of teachers associated teaching for social justice with cultivating the habit in students of posing critical questions about the world. They stressed the importance of promoting awareness by, for example, presenting students with multiple perspectives on social issues.

Further to the left on the ideological spectrum was a group of teachers who espoused an anti-oppression model (see, e.g., Bell, 1997) aimed at helping their students to understand and challenge injustices such as sexism, racism, homophobia and heterosexism, class inequality, and their interconnections. This group of teachers, smaller in number, was more likely to encourage their students to take action based on their inquiry into issues in the classroom and to give them opportunities to do so. These teachers saw themselves (to quote Mr. Raoul) as

“active citizens, occasionally engaged in protest” and yet “not unduly biased.” Rather than “poisoning young people’s minds with a particular ideology,” they saw their own active engagement with the world as enriching their teaching and modelling democratic citizenship.

We do not want to overstate the ideological differences we discerned among the veteran teachers. At the level of defining social justice, almost all the teachers spoke of such values as inclusion, respect, safety, ethics, democracy, equity, social responsibility, and fairness. At the level of curriculum and pedagogy (as discussed in more detail below), they engaged in significantly overlapping practices. Nevertheless, when we analyzed the details of how they envisioned teaching for social justice, some important differences of emphasis emerged.

Democracy: Voice versus Action

Nearly every participant mentioned democracy as integral to teaching for social justice, but they meant different things by it. More liberal teachers invoked the idea of social equality and respect for the individual within the classroom or school community. “Each kid has a right to be heard,” said Ms. Nathan. “A teacher has to have a really good pair of ears.” In a similar vein, Ms. Leigh explained, “In my classroom, social justice means everyone has a voice that he or she must use respectfully, responsibly, ethically, compassionately.” Mr. Richardson’s aim was “to create a place where unique views are encouraged.” “I try to practice a democratic classroom,” said Mr. Archibald. “The students have to be polite and conscious of each other and their feelings.”

This group of teachers was not unmindful of societal inequities, but they placed more emphasis on how these inequities negatively influenced interpersonal relations and had to be combated in the classroom. Teaching for social justice, said Ms. Winterburn, means teaching “social skills and ethical behavior.” “If you really think about how the world is going to be a better place to live in,” explained Mr. Wiebe, “then you’re going to make choices that aren’t going to be compromised by a position that would encourage sexism or homophobia or racism or classism.”

The set of teachers we have categorized as critical highlighted the fact that schools are not democracies. They underscored the unequal power relations between adults and youths, between teachers (many of whom were White and middle class) and students (many of whom were visible minorities, working class, and spoke English as an additional language). Mr. Raoul explained:

We ask the kids to do things that we adults would probably rebel against if asked to do. They’ve got to take all kinds of subjects that they don’t really identify with. I feel that we could do a lot better in getting them interested, involved in the curriculum.

Not surprisingly, the teachers who themselves came from working-class backgrounds and were people of color stressed the ways that school standards (whether related to assessment of learning outcomes or to discipline) often operate

to the disadvantage of those with the least power to set those standards. “Even for an Aboriginal person having some formal education like myself,” said Ms. Stewart, “I don’t take for granted that everyone has that opportunity to learn the rules of the game, because I know we don’t. Teachers need to come in to these inner-city schools with that understanding of their position of privilege and power.”

The teachers espousing a more critical perspective emphasized democracy as compromised by various social inequalities that need to be challenged by people acting together and engaging in public debate and protest. Ms. McIntosh criticized the widespread assumption that “social justice and progress will just occur without any political action or energy by people.” Thus, she, along with a number of other participants, stressed the importance of teaching directly about social movements and the role of human agency in history as well as of helping students to see how various forms of oppression interlock and to imagine a better future.

“It’s absolutely crucial for everybody to understand that struggle on a variety of levels has produced whatever good things we’ve got,” explained Ms. Toms. This means, according to Mr. Orłowski, teaching about “labor struggles and resistance movements” as a “first step in helping students to realize that change is possible.” In teaching about various struggles, critical teachers argued for a curricular focus on how various types of injustice intersect. Mr. Orłowski, for example, described a history lesson he developed on Robert Dunsmuir, a B.C. coalmine owner. Dunsmuir successfully exploited White racism among his workers, who had refused to let Chinese laborers join their union. When the all-White union went on strike, Dunsmuir persuaded Chinese workers to cross the picket line in the 1870s. Highlighting this as an example “in the history of British Columbia where racism in the working class hurt the working class and was exploited by the capitalist class,” Mr. Orłowski then invites his students to reflect on contemporary race/class dynamics at work in their lives (for further detail, see Orłowski, 2001). Awareness of the interconnections among different forms of oppression may aid students and others to build coalitions across lines of race, class, gender, and so on.

Teachers with a critical perspective are sometimes criticized for exaggerating societal problems and “leav[ing] the students hanging” (see Sleeter & Grant, 1994, p. 236). Critically-minded teachers in our study were cognizant of these criticisms and felt that an emphasis on agency, interconnections, and coalition-building offered their students hope. Explained Ms. Toms:

I don’t think education as it presently exists is the silver bullet, but I think that conscious individuals working collegially can really make a difference, developing in students the powers of critical thinking and the ability to envision a better world.

This invocation of critical thinking begs the question of the term’s meaning, another area where we discerned a difference in emphasis between liberal and critical teachers.

Critical Thinking: Reasoned Judgments versus Ideology Critique

Liberal teachers associated teaching for social justice with posing thoughtful questions and making reasoned judgments. As an English teacher, Ms. Clark wanted her students to learn to ask questions, support their opinions, and become more “aware about the world that they live in.” She posed ethical dilemmas to prompt students to “think for a second.” “My immediate focus is on the awareness part, not necessarily ‘let’s go out and change the world’.” In social studies, Mr. Morton said he teaches “for the understanding of the essential question,” which “requires judgment. For example, in grade 9 we look at who won and who lost in the American Revolution: patriots, loyalists, Blacks, Mohawks, women.” Mr. Bargeman wanted his students to “uncover the values that underlie their opinions” as a follow-up to a structured classroom debate on logging practices.

You’ve got one person doing research on clear-cutting and somebody doing research on selective logging, and they present their cases. A good follow-up to that is to ask, “OK, what’s being valued in the argument for clear-cutting?” I’m not going to tell you what to believe is right and wrong; that’s your job.

We heard critical teachers espousing related goals for their students, but they put more emphasis on the shaping influence of dominant ideology, especially as conveyed in the mass media. “Critical thinkers,” asserted Mr. McCabe, are “not blinded by the media and propaganda.” Added Mr. Orłowski, “Teaching for social justice means to teach in such a way that all students understand how power works in our society. It means helping students to look at the dominant discourses and how they actually privilege elites.”

The critical teachers asserted that the mainstream media—and, indeed, standard textbooks—reflect elite interests and viewpoints. Therefore, they concluded that the playing field upon which learners can discuss issues and come to reasoned judgments is uneven. Further, they assumed that all knowers, whether educators or students, are situated. As Mr. McCabe put it, “Any teacher who says, ‘I am just teaching the curriculum, I am neutral,’ is simply wrong. It can’t be done. We all have our cultural, socio-economic, and gender experiences, which affect the way we present things.” These assumptions, in turn, suggested a different role for the teacher, particularly when leading discussions of social issues.

Mr. Raoul was clear that teachers, regardless of their politics, are all activists in the sense that even “the teachers who don’t tackle these issues of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are basically tackling them. Not talking about these issues is in some ways confirming what is perceived by the kids as being the society’s bias.” Thus, Mr. Raoul noted, “I need to de-brainwash students by forcing questions on them, making them think of all the alternatives, yet prompting them to come up with a form of analysis, a judgment after considering all the angles to a problem.” He described this as a “balancing act” that involves both letting students

know “where I stand” as well as inviting “people who do not share my ideas to speak” in class, a notion shared by his liberal counterparts.

How the Teachers Approached Curricular Justice

The veteran teachers articulated a range of ways that teaching for social justice manifests in actual secondary-level classroom and school practices in a highly multicultural, urban setting (cf. Brandes & Kelly, 2000). As shorthand to refer to these various strategies, we use R. W. Connell’s (1993) concept of curricular justice, which highlights the importance of the kind of education students receive. For example, whose knowledge should be taught, and why? Following from the difference in perspectives that we discerned among the veteran teachers in our study, we perceived some differences in how they challenged the socially dominant curriculum through supplementation, deconstruction, and transformation.

Almost all of the participants spoke of the need to supplement the socially dominant, formal curriculum (i.e., the Integrated Resource Packages approved and published by the British Columbia Ministry of Education). In particular, they wanted their students to consider more fully the perspectives of marginalized groups. As Mr. Bargeman noted, social studies textbooks in the 1980s began to do some supplementation by adding information as a sidebar to the main text.

Those little colored sidebars about women and the Chinese laborers allowed teachers to say: “OK, now we have included that and we can move on to the ‘real stuff’.” I have never liked that sidebar approach, and yet I am guilty of having done that because that was the only resource we had available.

In addition to supplementation, a number of teachers said they deconstructed the formal curriculum, not only by calling attention to omissions but also by linking these omissions to various forms of institutional injustice. Deconstruction in this sense means “to disrupt the process that differentiates the Other from the Normal” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 35). Mr. Ferguson, for example, explored anti-Semitism when he taught a social studies unit on World War II. Drawing his students’ attention to the fact that the textbook contained only two sentences about the Holocaust, he then supplemented it with the documentary “The Last Days” and a discussion from *Bastards and Boneheads* about Canada’s unwillingness to take in Jewish refugees. To further underscore the textbook’s relative silence about the Holocaust and the possible consequences of this silence, Mr. Ferguson asked his students, many of whom were refugees or immigrants, to consider the plight of the Vietnamese boat people. “What, if anything,” Mr. Ferguson asked his students, “have we learned from the Holocaust?”

Teachers influenced by a more critical perspective went beyond supplementing and deconstructing the socially dominant curriculum to emphasize transformation. Their goal has been aptly described by Giroux (1988) as helping “students

develop a deep and abiding faith in the struggle to overcome economic, political and social injustices, and to further humanize themselves as part of this struggle” (p. 127). Ms. McIntosh supplemented the textbook’s only brief mention of the Komagata Maru incident with oral histories. She noted, for example, how the Sikh community in British Columbia raised money to support the Punjabi passengers stranded aboard the Komagata Maru freighter and to mount a court challenge of the Canadian immigration law aimed at excluding Asian immigrants. She noted that some White people supported the Sikh-organized Shore Committee, despite the White supremacist attitudes prevalent in 1914. To underscore the lessons on the importance of “political action and historical agency,” Ms. McIntosh gave students a choice of assignments, based on the assumption that they were living at the time of the Komagata Maru incident and wanting to resist immigration law. They could, for example, create a poster to encourage people to come to a meeting of the Shore Committee where the issues would be presented, or they could write a letter to the editor. She informed her students that these examples of taking action were all strategies still viable in the present-day context.

Challenges the Teachers Encountered

We asked participants to reflect on the challenges that they faced in teaching for social justice. Their responses varied depending on their political perspective, the demographic profile of the community where they taught, the needs of their students, the micro-politics of their department and school, and their own social locations. In this section we discuss three sets of challenges identified by participants, all of which required them to take a stand.

Discussions of Social Issues

Teachers make “political” decisions as they lead class discussions on social issues. They choose when, how, and if they share their own opinions in class, and on what occasions they take a stand. None of our participants believed that teacher neutrality was possible, and many felt comfortable sharing their opinions on social issues with their students, at least eventually or if asked. They were at pains, however, to explain how they attempted to give their students room to develop, and marshal evidence and arguments in support of, their own opinions. “The challenge for me,” explained Mr. Ferguson, “is to walk the line between exposing kids to issues and getting them thinking by putting in my two cents worth and not shoving my stuff down their throat. . . . I don’t want them all to walk out with the same exact view of whatever issue. To me that’s not teaching—that’s mind control.”

Liberal teachers seemed more confident than critical teachers that if they provided students with data and viewpoints on topics like the distribution of wealth in Canada, held back from expressing their own views on such social issues, and, as

Mr. Morton put it, “developed an inclusive, non-threatening classroom,” that a fuller range of views would be heard and considered.” Ms. Parker, for one, was skeptical. She taught in a “predominantly wealthy” community that was half East Asian, half White, with a small minority of First Nations youth. Many of the students, influenced by their parents’ views, were “very conservative, especially about economics, and totally anti-union and anti-welfare,” according to Ms. Parker. She was passionate about the need to engage her students: “It’s more important to educate these kids into another way of thinking, because they may well be the people who get in to positions of power.” Yet, given the conservative slant of the mainstream media, Ms. Parker often found herself “presenting how the media is biased rather than saying, ‘Well, here’s a totally left-wing source, and here’s the *Vancouver Sun*’ [a right-wing source]. The challenge, then, for critical teachers was to model the importance of taking a stand without impeding student inquiry or caricaturing opposing viewpoints. They mentioned such strategies as critically examining their own views.

Micro-Politics

Researchers have documented how schools are arenas of struggle, marked by a diversity of goals and ideological debate (e.g., Ball, 1987; Cochran-Smith, 1999; Sleeter, 1996; Solomon & Allen, 2001). According to Mr. McCabe, “the systemic inertia” of school bureaucracies, prescribed learning outcomes, government exams, and published school rankings based on easily measured outcomes such as test scores all serve to “reinforce conformity” and prevent innovation. For example, he and an Aboriginal colleague tried to develop a model for a First Nations 12 course but were blocked by administrators who did not share their social justice goals. Others, like Ms. Pelletier and Ms. Parker, wanted to develop and offer equity-related courses and ultimately succeeded, but not before they met political resistance from colleagues. Explained Ms. Pelletier, staff resisted “the very idea that in the 1990s, we *needed* a course called (as it was then) ‘Women, Gender, and Society 12.’” Administrators resisted by scheduling the course against the only block of English 12, thus reducing the number of students who could take the gender course. Counsellors, who “have a lot of influence over who takes what course,” have channelled certain young men to the gender course in the hope of “improving” their “disagreeable or non-progressive attitudes.” Yet this “usually doesn’t work” and affects the learning of those who truly want to delve into the subject matter.

According to Mr. Raoul, most teachers have “convictions on social matters, but there is fear in school of being controversial. Teachers are pissing in their pants all the time, because they don’t want the principal or parents breathing down their neck.” A related challenge is the risk of alienating colleagues, even like-minded ones. Explained Mr. Raoul, “They might not like the idea that you bring up controversial subjects in class. They don’t want to associate with you, because they feel they are going to be targeted by administrators as part of the same club.”

Indeed, several participants mentioned not always being able to count on administrators to support them when they took a public stand on a social justice issue. Ms. Leigh described regularly challenging students in the hallways if she overheard sexist, homophobic, and other slurs. “Boys, within the context of the amoeba [a very large group of other boys], have come up and stuck their nose almost on my nose and told me to fuck off.” Students also made this teacher a target of sexist graffiti. For two years in a row, the words “Leigh is a bitch” appeared on a school wall. In response, a school administrator advised her: “Don’t even raise it with the class. Just go on like it never happened. If you show them vulnerability, it will diminish your authority within the class.” Upon reflection, Ms. Leigh decided this advice was “absolute garbage.” “I said to my class, ‘Wow, this really hurt’.”

Department heads will sometimes try to reign in social justice-minded teachers by mandating the use of particular textbooks and scheduling common exams at the end of the year. According to Mr. Raoul:

That is a way of manipulating staff, forcing staff to teach to a curriculum. The textbook is never vague, and the questions coming out of the books have to be very specific. So you need to read the book to answer the questions, and reading the book fills in the class for the whole year. And you’re stuck with a program which is even more biased, because you’re teaching one vision, one textbook with a few authors, usually male authors anyway, White, and so on.

At a conference of fellow English teachers, Mr. Archibald suggested that “teachers consider greater use of anthologies that include stories from Africa and the West Indies, and it was not taken very well around the table, because they felt that the stories from the United States and England, written from a White point of view, are the cream of the crop.” Similar attitudes about what constituted “excellent literature” prevailed at Mr. Archibald’s school, where he was “the only Black teacher on staff.”

Prescribed learning outcomes and provincial exams, according to several participants, function similarly to narrow the curriculum. As Mr. McCabe put it, they “police teachers”:

Knowledge is completely controlled. We do India and Gandhi’s social movement in a day! We do South Africa’s antiapartheid movement in a day! The content of the prescribed curriculum keeps the deeper meaning hidden. This standard curriculum is anti-intellectual.

As bell hooks has noted in the context of university teaching, “Given that our educational institutions are so deeply invested in a banking system, teachers are more rewarded when we do not teach against the grain. The choice to work against the grain, to challenge the status quo, often has negative consequences” (1994, p. 203).

Complexities of Social Location

Recent work on anti-oppressive education has emphasized the many un-

knowns involved in teaching and learning. Kumashiro, drawing from the feminist poststructuralist work of Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), notes that “teaching is not a representational act, an unproblematic transmission of knowledge about the world to the student, but is a performative act, constituting reality as it names it, while paradoxically acknowledging that the teacher cannot control how the student reads what the teacher is trying to en-act” (2000, p. 46).

Some of the participants identified this dimension of teaching as a challenge. Ms. McIntosh noted that at times, “you [the teacher] feel that what you’re trying to teach and what they [students] are taking away from it is not the same thing.” To illustrate, Ms. McIntosh described a grade-11 English unit she designed using *The Concubine’s Children* (Chong, 1994), which tells the story of Denise Chong’s grandmother, brought from China as a young concubine by a peasant man seeking wealth in Vancouver’s Chinatown.

You will hear from students, “Well, May-ying [the concubine], she’s a gambling, drinking slut,” basically is what they walk away with, whereas you’re trying to teach them about all the difficulties she’s faced. You’ve formed assignments to demonstrate all that she did for the family and the limitations that she had. But you still see that that’s not what they’ve taken away from it necessarily.

The gap of unknown proportions between what students learn and what teachers try to teach is partly attributable to students’ diverse social locations, the connections between these locations and curricular justice, and the wide variety of possible student responses, even when students are similarly socially located. Although the teacher’s goal might be to empower students or at least to raise their awareness, “you might find that you’re making a student in your class particularly uncomfortable, even in places where you wouldn’t expect it,” explained Ms. McIntosh. In teaching about the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, with First Nations students in the class and in a school where racism against Aboriginal people was still in evidence, Ms. McIntosh did not want to feed into the stereotype, however inadvertently, that “everyone who went to a residential school is messed up.” Yet she felt it important to examine the devastating and long-lasting impact of residential schools on Aboriginal people. Teachers can legitimately “fear” that “talking about certain topics” with their students could result in “making things worse somehow,” concluded Ms. McIntosh, and yet in the name of creating a safe environment, teachers might also “put dampers on critical conversation.”

Ms. Pelletier described just such a situation. In teaching at an inner-city school, she had avoided talking about issues related to poverty, wanting to be sensitive to the fact that many of her students experienced poverty and its ills on a daily basis. Then a student teacher brought in an article about the Downtown Eastside (Vancouver’s poorest neighborhood) and elicited “a variety of views” from students. “In watching him . . . I realized that I could do this without stepping on anybody’s toes or without hurting anybody,” reflected Ms. Pelletier. “But also I

realized the *benefit* of having the discussion, because it was so germane to the kids' life experiences."

A related set of challenges has to do with teaching about injustices and targeted groups when teachers are, in many ways, privileged. How do teachers strike the right tone? The approach and tone may need to shift, depending on the social locations of the teacher vis-à-vis the mix of students in any particular classroom; otherwise, the teacher risks sounding condescending, belittling, or self-righteous. Ms. Leigh, a heterosexual woman, discussed the issues and questions that arose once she decided to do a series of lessons on homophobia with her class.

I had to confront my own background. I was raised by a father who is pretty conservative. He is from a southern Ontario, protestant, WASP background. Homosexuality wasn't something we talked about in my home. My father certainly was capable of making homophobic jokes as we grew up. I thought, "Wow, I'm going to have to look at myself, too." I was concerned about what language I should use.

Ms. Stewart, an Aboriginal teacher, referred to the process Ms. Leigh described as doing "personal work," a necessary first step in teachers' engagement in anti-oppression education. "If I was doing gay/straight alliance stuff," Ms. Stewart explained, "if I haven't done my own work on homophobia, then I'd have to be working with some pretty gracious people to have to tolerate my ignorance." Just as she expected to do the personal work on homophobia, Ms. Stewart expected her non-Aboriginal colleagues to do the personal work on Aboriginal issues.

Yet another set of challenges related to social location had to do with teachers occupying less privileged positions in certain contexts. In these instances, teachers did not speak with an authoritative voice and were vulnerable to students, parents, or administrators articulating oppressive viewpoints (cf. Maher, 1999; Walkerdine, 1981). Ms. Parker, for example, described how, in a Social Studies 11 discussion of current events, the talk "turned to sexist stuff and 'women rape men. There is no problem because women are just as bad'."

I wanted to cry and run out of the room. I remember feeling just so overwhelmed by the way the tide had turned, and then all of a sudden this First Nations kid, a guy who was very cool, stopped it and just went, "What are you talking about? That is ridiculous," and he just turned the whole tide back, and I was so thankful to him.

Another example provided by Ms. Parker forced her to cope with negative consequences and the fear of being ostracized by members of her school community. When a student brought an article about homophobia in high schools to Ms. Parker's women's studies class for discussion, the time seemed right for her to come out as a lesbian. A year later the estranged father of one of the students in her women's studies class learned that Ms. Parker was a lesbian and had taught several of his daughters over the years.

He wrote to the superintendent, he wrote to the trustees, he wrote to the principal to try and get me fired for being a lesbian. . . . It was a horrible experience that went on for several months. It was quite awhile before the admin even called home and then discovered that the dad didn't even live there. The mother and daughters were all totally supportive of me.

Ms. Parker's story is an excellent reminder of the personal risks that educators take when teaching for social justice in an unjust world.

Conclusion and Discussion

Progressive teachers across the ideological spectrum, from liberal to critical, resonate to the idea of teaching for social justice, although they mean distinct things by it. When the participants in this study defined teaching for social justice, the liberal teachers focused on posing questions and highlighting multiple perspectives, whereas the critical teachers spotlighted anti-oppression education and social action. For both groups, democratic citizenship and critical thinking were fundamental elements of teaching for social justice. The liberal teachers associated democracy with social equality and respect for individual voices in the classroom. By contrast, the critical teachers stressed that democracy as currently practiced is compromised by social inequalities; they envisioned a more participatory model that calls for fuller public debate, protest, coalition-building, and collective problem-solving. The liberal teachers defined critical thinking as making reasoned judgments and creating awareness among their students, not necessarily as changing the world. By contrast, the critical teachers equated critical thinking with helping students understand and challenge the workings of power and how dominant discourses often privilege elites.

Following from these conceptual differences, liberal and critical teachers envisioned curricular justice somewhat differently. For the liberal teachers, who were more focused on awareness as the end-goal, curricular justice meant adding the perspectives of marginalized groups and brainstorming with students about why these perspectives were missing from standard textbooks. Critical teachers, in addition, wanted their students to learn about the importance of human agency and to be inspired by the struggles of social movements to bring about positive social change.

The participants described three sets of challenges they faced when teaching for social justice. In leading classroom discussions of social issues, the veterans coped with tensions around when and how to voice their own opinions without dampening student inquiry. In pushing for curricular justice in their classrooms and beyond, they met with varying degrees of political resistance from administrators, colleagues, parents, and students. In reflecting on their pedagogy, they noted the complexities introduced by their social location and the social locations of their students and how these connected to various injustices under consideration. The framing of a social issue, the teacher's tone, and the risks of taking a stand shifted,

depending on whether, for example, a teacher was privileged or potentially targeted in relation to the issue at hand.

While a fair number of teachers (both novices and veterans) might be proponents of social justice, a far knottier proposition is how one goes about acting as a change agent for social justice in the classroom. We know from an ongoing self-study of HSJTEP that student teachers, during their extended practicum, spotlight the perspectives of marginalized groups (such as Aboriginal people) but are more reluctant to have their students discuss the reasons for these groups' exclusion from the socially dominant curriculum. We know that HSJTEP student teachers challenge demeaning language (e.g., homophobic slurs) in their classrooms but worry about whether to strike a more "neutral" stance, even while acknowledging that teaching is inherently moral (Brandes & Kelly, 2000; Kelly & Brandes, 2001). In the accounts of classroom practice presented in this article, beginning teachers and teacher educators can learn how veteran teachers addressed such dilemmas and tensions.

We also found certain dimensions of teaching for social justice to be either lacking or underdeveloped in the accounts of the veteran teachers. Few participants dwelled on issues of assessment and discipline or reported in any detail about how these facets of teaching link to social justice in particular, which suggests that these might be areas for professional development. We note that assessment and discipline are among the more public dimensions of teaching and may thus be considered among the more risky for teachers to tackle alone.

Although a number of veterans spoke to the importance of exploring the interconnectedness of oppressions, they were able to offer very few concrete examples illustrating such "intersectionality," suggesting the need for more curricular resources on how, for example, race, class, gender, and sexual identity intersect. Global and multicultural feminists developed the idea of intersectionality "to analyze social relations from the standpoint of their daily lives, which were shaped by the mutually supportive or sometimes competitive relations between androcentrism, Eurocentrism, and bourgeois projects" (Harding, 1997, p. 385; cf. Collins, 1990).

By the same token, although a number of veterans told poignant as well as disturbing stories that spoke to the complexities for pedagogy of social location, few had access to the conceptual tools being developed by feminist, postcolonial, and other scholars (see, e.g., Ellsworth, 1997; Razack, 1998; Smith, 1999) to name and think through the practical consequences of these complexities. For example, Alcoff (1988) theorized a "politics of positionality," arguing that key aspects of people's identity—such as their gender, "race," class, and age—"are markers of relational positions rather than essential qualities. Their effects and implications change according to context" (Tetreault, 1993, p. 139). Scholar-practitioners need to take more account of the difference that positionality makes in teaching for social justice.

The apparent gap between such concepts as intersectionality and positionality and the applications of such knowledge to the teaching of high school English and social studies may be partially symptomatic of a larger problem. When social justice

is typically defined abstractly (such as valuing diversity or as exercising democratic rights and responsibilities) teachers are not necessarily encouraged to think through how injustice and social change occur—or how their practices support or challenge the status quo.

Clearly, more in-depth inquiry needs to be done. By mapping the diverse meanings that a group of veteran high school teachers gave to the notion of teaching for social justice, this study contributes to an understanding of the possibilities as well as the challenges of doing this kind of work. We hope it will help educators think through what they mean when they imagine themselves as promoters of social justice and weigh choices about what and how to teach.

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