Claiming the Contentious:
Literacy Teachers as Leaders
of Social Justice Principles and Practices

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Teaching literacy skills is inextricably meshed with the work of transformation. James Berlin (1996) argued, "Literacy enables the individual to understand that the conditions of experience are made by human agents and thus can be remade by human agents" (p. 101). When students learn to read and write, they are learning the knowledge and skills needed in order to better understand their world and ultimately to participate in the remaking of their realities. Leadership for social justice is a democratic, empowering relationship involving human beings who are bound together by common and distinct purposes. These principles of social justice are not only inherent in teaching literacy. Most subjects carry weighty moral concerns and overt political/power relations; therefore, the topic of social justice should not be something that is sequestered to literacy classes.[1]

Specifically, we argue that pedagogical content knowledge—a marker of professional teaching competence—must eventually engage students in the moral and ethical issues surrounding the use of knowledge in our democracy. Any conception of literacy teachers' work must account

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for subject matter taught in schools; and, as a corollary, teachers are positioned to help K-12 students understand *knowledge relations* that reify race, class, and gender inequities still prevalent in our democracy.[2] As a way to demonstrate how this can be achieved, we begin this article with a brief review of the literature that recognizes teachers as educational leaders. Then, we use the case of literacy instruction to illustrate transformative pedagogical principles and practices that serve other university faculty in PK-12 educational leadership programs.[3]

Teaching Leadership Requires
Instructional Knowledge for Social Justice

It is not just democratic intentions that qualify an instructional leader as an advocate for social justice. Knowledge is a critical variable in understanding how to help students understand and participate in our pluralistic democracy. Shulman (1987) defined *pedagogical content knowledge* as "that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional knowledge" (p. 8). He continued,

> [p]edagogical content knowledge is of special interest because it identifies the distinctive bodies of knowledge for teaching. It represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction. (p. 8)

Teachers' pedagogical content knowledge represents their potential professional power, and has been considered the foundation upon which to professionalize teaching.

Teaching for social justice in educational leadership, then, is an act that educates students for social responsibility (Berman, 1997) and conscious social reproduction (Gutmann, 1999). This view of teaching is consistent with previous descriptions of a teacher's role, including Giroux's (1992) *public intellectual*, Goodlad's (1994) *moral steward of democracy*, and Lambert's (1995) *deliberative professional*. An example of this type of pedagogical content knowledge is illustrated in the work of Vivian Paley (1992). As a kindergarten teacher, Paley saw her work as inherently related to helping students understand and negotiate this public space.

> The children I teach are just emerging from life's deep wells of private perspective: babyhood and family. Then along comes school. It is the first real exposure to the public arena. Children are required to share

> materials and teachers in a space that belongs to everyone. Within this public space a new concept of open access can develop if we choose to make this a goal. Here will be found not only the strong ties of intimate friendship but in addition, the habit of full and equal participation, upon request. (p. 21)

The ability to attain and maintain this transformative habit is dependent, in part, upon the tools the teacher (i.e., the leader) chooses to utilize.

These principles of social justice are not only inherent in teaching literacy. As Darling-Hammond (1998) noted, "[s]chools must cultivate in all students the skills, knowledge, and understanding that both lead them to want to embrace the values undergirding our pluralistic democracy and arm them with a keen intelligence capable of free thought" (p. 80). All members of the school organization must be empowered to engage in and maintain a state of critical leadership.

This empowerment occurs primarily through reflection and dialogue regarding the organization's vision of how equity is distributed within that community. Though leaders may frequently engage in reflection and dialogue regarding the issues at hand, the question of who is in control of the conversation, what is considered an appropriate topic of discussion, and how the dialogue progresses dramatically changes depending on the type of leadership that is in play (Heckman, 1996). In order to build capacity for teacher leadership for social justice pedagogy, specific organizational supports are required, including a re-thinking of traditional allocations of power and traditional leadership hierarchies. The principal or district administrator does not establish power relationships that are exclusively defined by positional authority. The role of administrative leadership for social justice facilitates a culture where the impetus for transforming the social context can come from any source within the organization.

Teachers Are Leaders:
The Case of Literacy Teachers as Leaders for Social Justice

Literacy teachers, by the very nature of their professional knowledge, are responsible for helping students understand how they have the power to be transformational in their own lives. The teaching of language and literacy is a democratic act inextricably linked to issues of emancipation and empowerment. That is, literacy teachers are responsible for developing students' use of language to empower and transform themselves and to participate within various social communities or discourses. In short, literacy professionals are responsible for students' abilities to *critically read the world* (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). As Berlin (1996) suggested,

> A literacy that is without a commitment to active participation in deci-
> sion making in the public sphere cannot possibly serve the interests of
> egalitarian political arrangements...to have citizens who are unable to
> write and read for the public forum thus defeats the central purpose of
> the notion of democracy. (p. 101)

Thus, teaching literacy is inextricably meshed with the work of trans-
formation.

Recent works in critical literacy instruction have demonstrated how
teachers can provide students with opportunities to develop their abilities
to participate in pluralistic and divergent social communities (Behrman,
2006; see also Appleman, 2000; Beck, 2005; Comber & Simpson, 2001;
Pace, 2006; Spector & Jones, 2007). At the same time, this educative work
is not without its complications. Because language is used as the primary
means to negotiate one's place(s) in society, teachers of literacy have the
power to liberate, empower or oppress their students. Therefore, to meet
the challenges of developing students' abilities to fully participate as
active citizens in a democracy, literacy educators utilize a *pedagogy of
possibility* in order to develop students' *epistemic literacy* and *sense of
social responsibility*.

*Teaching leadership for social justice requires developing students'
epistemic literacy*. Students are assigned reading and writing tasks in
schools, not only so they can learn how to encode and decode the language
effectively and efficiently, but also so they can better understand literacy
as a social practice. Teaching students how to communicate means being
responsible for providing students with the knowledge and skills neces-
sary to participate and co-create a democratic society. Part of the process
of learning to communicate involves both teacher and student in a process
of identifying the ideologies and epistemologies that marginalize and
sometimes devalue students and their linguistic backgrounds. Wells and
Chang-Wells (1992) called this the *epistemic level of engagement*. They
argued that "*All* serious and sustained acts of written composition demand
an epistemic mode of engagement...[by engaging with texts epistemically]
one can make advances in one's intellectual, moral or affective under-
standing to an extent that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to
achieve" (Wells & Chang-Wells, pp. 140-141).

Classroom practices such as literature circles, reader response jour-
nals, writing to learn strategies, Socratic seminars, reader's theatre, and
others, can provide students with the opportunities to critically reflect
on the text from different viewpoints. Behrman (2006) found six distinct
categories of classroom practices designed to teach about language,
power, and text: "reading supplementary texts, reading multiple texts,
reading from a resistant perspective, producing counter-texts, conducting

student-choice research projects, and taking social action" (p. 482). All these classroom practices enable students to develop deep, principled understandings of themselves and their world.

Teachers of language and literacy help their students become fully literate by explicitly and collaboratively engaging in these types of learning activities. Reader response journals, for example, provide students with a confidential place to express their feelings about what they read and to begin to understand the human condition as they explore their own understandings of in writing to themselves and their teachers. Literature circles also encourage students to develop an appreciation for different viewpoints and allow students to connect with their peers as they discuss various human motives that influence the events in the novels they read.

In literacy education, teachers are responsible for helping PK-12 students learn how to engage in this epistemic mode as they read and write in order to become fully or powerfully literate (Gee, 2001; Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). In educational leadership programs, professors should require preservice and inservice teachers to identify ideologies, epistemologies, or any other discourse that marginalizes and devalues teachers and PK-12 students within schools. Teachers must have the kinds of protection and freedoms to engage students in the hard work of socially-just pedagogies. Giroux (1992) suggested that in order to meet these transformational learning goals, literacy teachers should "give students the opportunity to connect their own experiences to classroom knowledge by writing papers in which they explore particular readings by analyzing how they relate to issues that make up their own daily lives" (p. 315). It is through this type of dialogic practice that one is able to arrive at new self-understanding and a sense of connectedness with others.

Teaching leadership for social justice requires developing students' sense of social responsibility. To be literate, one must make connections to the concepts in ways that connect with their lives, to question the validity of the information, and to imagine possibilities that have never before existed. In other words, we must consider ideas from multiple perspectives. These same abilities are identified in Berman's (1997) description of social responsibility. He defined being socially responsible in the following manner:

> Understanding that the individual is rooted within a larger social net-
> work, within interlocking communities that range from the local to the
> global…. Creating relationships with others and with society that are
> framed by the ethical considerations of justice and care…. Acting with
> integrity…. Seeing one's daily actions within a larger social context….
> [and] Living in ways that are consistent with one's values. (pp. 12-14)

Any reading and writing curriculum designed to develop students' knowledge of and abilities to communicate with others in their social communities will also assist the development of students' sense of social responsibility. Student created texts, such as counter-texts, student-choice research projects and I-Search research projects all provide developing readers and writers with opportunities to engage in rich and purposeful literacy-learning tasks that "provide students with avenues to construct their understandings…and endorse the students' expressions of their experience" (Behrman, 2006, p. 484). When grappling with reading and writing, students are inherently interacting with complex ideas in multiple ways and reflecting in ways that involve empathizing with others.

Not only do literacy teachers better serve their students by acknowledging the social justice elements of their work; teachers in other disciplines would also benefit from examining ways in which their content helps students find access to their social communities or "meaningful ways to contribute to the world" (Berman, p. 194). In mathematics classes, students could be required to actively question long standing disparities in education such as the mathematics achievement gap between girls and boys, white students and students of color, and students of different economic status (Perez, 2000). Students could also solve problems that bring to the forefront social injustices. For example,

> Children working in a Southeast Asian country earn 56¢ for every soccer ball they make. If one child makes 22 soccer balls in one week, how much money did s/he earn in that week?

In doing so, students can become more aware of their social responsibility to the world (Gutstein & Peterson, 2005).

Teaching leadership for social justice requires developing a "pedagogy of possibility." When literacy teachers engage in the transformative work of fostering their students' abilities to write, they empower both themselves and their students. Roger Simon (1992) stated, "empowerment literally means to give ability to, to permit or enable" (p. 143). Teachers of literacy conceptualize their work as a *pedagogy of possibility* which provides students with opportunities to explore and validate their own experiences as a means of developing their understanding about their world and the language that they use to define it (Simon, 1992). In essence, teachers' of reading and writing recognize they must work *with* the students to learn the language. This relationship is similar to the *power with* relationship of democratic leadership; in the context of the literacy classroom, power manifests itself through interactions with the acts of teaching and learning how to read and write.

In order to sustain this pedagogy of possibility, teachers of literacy

need to create programmatic goals that develop students who have both a commitment to and activism for engaging the school community in a continual process of critical and caring reflection and dialogue. If students graduating from K-12 schools today are going to live up to the demands of democratic citizenship in the United States, then they must have the knowledge and skills needed to engage all community members in a critical and generative process. A process that has the potential to humanize all participants involved.

Developing a Literacy of Social Justice for the School Community

The greatest limitation to engaging in democratic leadership or leadership for social justice is the reluctance or the inability of community members to engage in an ongoing emancipating conversation. If literacy teachers are to be effective in transforming the organization and its social context, they must be willing to raise critical questions regarding how they can best teach all students. As Paley has said, "if we choose to make it a goal, within this public space a new concept of open access can develop."

All PK-12 teachers, literacy teachers included, need assistance and support of their administrators in order to create classrooms and schools where all members of the organization—students, parents, fellow teachers, and administrators—have the opportunity to engage in a dialogue that is both participatory and self-critiquing. Principals and district administrators can better support the emancipatory teaching practices of literacy teachers and their colleagues by employing transformative and critical leadership practices in their schools. In essence they are servant leaders who build and maintain a collaborative school culture that fosters the examination of issues of social change and work to solve problems at their school and issues within their community that allow for the emancipation from dominating structures (Portin, 1999). These leaders also employ a political or consensus model for decision-making, rather than a rational model (Witherspoon, 1997).

In conclusion it should be clear that literacy teachers are not viewed as a substitute for the traditional authority figure in schools nor are they the only ones responsible for facilitating or negotiating the change. Instead, the notion we believe that all teachers are responsible for consciously dialoguing with other members of the school community regarding "the practices of schooling in relation to the social, cultural, political, and economic context of education" (Angus, 1989, p. 84). Social justice leadership demands that organizational members consciously attempt

to engage in dialogue about a level playing field. The collective group, rather than any individual, determines the vision that is established through the dialogue. The dialogue must remain critical in nature with an ongoing goal of identifying inherent biases and inequities in the community.

Notes

[1] Challenges of equity in mathematics teaching are pervasive. The belief that only "some students are capable of learning mathematics" (NCTM, 2000, p. 12) creates a power differential and leads to lower expectations for certain groups of students--notably women and minorities.

[2] Concerning other forms of inequities, we acknowledge that others may be better suited to help students understand institutional, structural, and psychosocial inequities, for instance.

[3] Although we highlight the instructional practices of literacy teachers in this work, we recognize that these transformative practices are not unique to literacy instruction but are promoted in other content areas as well.

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