Drawing on Social Justice Education

Creating Metaphorical Images To Foster and Assess Individual Transformation in Preservice Teacher Education

Judith Reed

Introduction

"If I can make a difference in just one child's life!" Such is the hope frequently voiced by young teachers-to-be. As a teacher educator devoted to social justice education, I must bite my tongue as inwardly I object: *Just **one child**?*

The student whose sights are naively set on "just one child," has far to go toward becoming a teacher who understands the systemic inequities in our world, and who is capable of confronting those issues in self, in the classroom, and in society. How to help this student, and the many like her, embark on the exhilarating but demanding, sometimes agonizing journey through self-transformation toward teacher-as-agent-of-change: this is the task. As with any task in education, it is helpful to have benchmarks, ways to assess progress. However, this inner transformative work does not lend itself to checklists and rubrics.

This article describes a metaphorical imaging activity used in World Educational Links, a graduate teacher certification program, to help future social justice educators explore their relationship with society and their sense of interconnectedness and empowerment to effect change. The author investigates possibilities inherent in the activity for helping to assess individual transformation, as future teachers come to view their mission in terms not of "just one child," not even "one child at a time," but of engaging as teacher-activists in a collective movement for social change.

The World Educational Links Program

World Educational Links (WEL) aims to prepare future educators for anti-op-

Judith Reed is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Keene State College, Keene, New Hampshire.

pressive teaching, critical pedagogy, and social activism (see Reed & Black, 2007.) Implicit in this task is a difficult process of self-scrutiny. "Becoming a teacher ... committed to social change requires a fundamental shift in the way one views the world, one's place in it, and one's relationship to others" (Rodgers, 2006). (See also Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 2000; Liston & Zeichner, 1996; Weiler, 2002.)

Assessment of teaching competencies is a basic necessity, often ruled by standards and guidelines provided by state departments of education and national professional organizations. While we are not required to assess formally the inner self-transformation that WEL strives to engender, we are constantly scanning our students for signs that the program is achieving its goals in this respect.

Assessing Self-Transformation

We have adapted an activity that Sheldon Berman (1990, 1993) created in order to study the development of social consciousness among young people. This activity, which entails drawing a metaphorical image, is effective for initiating thought and conversation regarding how one views one's own place in, and relationship with, the wider society.

> When it is difficult for people to describe this in words, I've asked them first to draw the way they see their own relationship to society. I've collected drawings from elementary school children, from high school and college students, and from adults who represent a wide range of lifestyles and viewpoints. These drawings usually reveal complex feelings towards society—sometimes a rich mosaic of interconnectedness, sometimes the painful expression of alienation and powerlessness, and sometimes the struggle to reconcile hope and pain. (Berman, 1990)

By way of introduction to the activity, WEL students are told that each of us

perceives and experiences our relationship with the wider society differently. This relationship is a rather abstract notion, however, and for many it helps to begin by conjuring an image, or visual metaphor. Drawing paper, crayons, and markers are provided, and students are asked to "draw an image representing how you see your relationship to those in the world around you, or to the larger society."

They are to give the drawing a title, and on the back describe what it means. They have an opportunity when they are done to show and explain their drawings to others in a small group and then briefly in the larger group. A group discussion can then take shape, often with reflections on how one's role as educator is connected with this perception of one's relationship with society.

Beyond its use as a learning and teaching tool, I wondered if the technique might be an effective way to document and qualitatively assess changes in a person's self-perceived relationship with society. I conducted the metaphorical image activity in August, at the beginning of the WEL program,[1] and again in May, at the end of our formal seminars together. The initial drawings were collected and sequestered until after the second drawings were rendered.

In examining these drawings and the interns' written narratives, I discerned five emblematic themes suggestive of a progressive orientation:

- *Connectedness*: a feeling for the interconnections between self and others, and among all humanity.

- *Impact*: a sense of one's ability to have impact in the world, to make a difference.

- *Self-transformation*: an understanding of the need for inner preparation in order to transform society.

- *Social activism*: a moral imperative

to actively foster equity and social justice.

◆ *Collectivity*: an understanding of the need to act collectively in order to be effective.

Analysis of the Images

It is noteworthy that very few initial drawings were devoid of imagery indicating a sense of connection to the wider world. (After all, this is a group of people who have elected to pursue a career in teaching; small wonder that they begin with a sense of connection to others.) The theme of "impact," the extent to which one feels capable of making a difference, is where the greatest differences are seen. Not uncommon is an image of a passive sort of ripple effect, a trickle-outwards theory of social change, rather than any vision of oneself as an activist having purposeful impact. (*See, for example, Carol's drawing in Fig. 5.*)

A more progressive orientation was variously expressed thorough images of connectedness that were accompanied by images and words that show a belief in personal impact buttressed by self-transformation, and/or a commitment to social activism. In our highly individualistic society, images conveying the necessity for collectivity in effecting social change seem to appear less frequently.

Case examples will illustrate some of the indicators that emerge from an analysis of the images. Following are four sets of drawings reflecting progress over the course of the year.[2]

Example 1:
Lucy's New-Found "Impact"

August (*see Figure 1*): Lucy's page, entitled "Intimidation," contains, left to right: a tree, flowers, a bear with sharp teeth bared, a snake, an ant, a booted foot about to tread on the ant. Her narrative:

This is my replication of how I relate to the wider society. In this drawing I represent the ant about to be stepped on, or be eaten by the snake. I choose myself as the ant because I feel like I am little in society. I want to make and help society grow in numerous ways, but being small, how can I help the whole world. I am also intimidated because something is deep engrained in me not to cause chaos, i.e., just agree and move on. But I don't want to be like that. The leg and snake represent the fear I have if I try to do something that society doesn't agree with.

May (*see Figure 2*): Lucy centers a large, solid tree on the page, with planet Earth showing through the branches as though seen from space. Her title is "Tree of Growth," and she writes:

The tree represents me. The image depicts how each day I continue to grow and strengthen. With this found strength, I know I can change society for the better. In everything I have done over the year and in the years to come, the knowledge I have learned will influence my choices, my students and society.

In her first drawing, Lucy dares to disclose the deep fears that many feel on confronting the serious social problems that exist, and the sense of helplessness that is all too common. Her later drawing portrays a very different sense of self, with its central solid tree trunk and branches almost embracing the earth. Whether or not she still experiences "intimidation," she now has "found strength" and knows she

Figure 1
Lucy (August)

Figure 2:
Lucy (May)

can effect social change. Lucy's drawings reveal clear movement out of helplessness toward *impact*. Interestingly, the tree still appears by itself; perhaps Lucy has still to appreciate fully the power of collective action to amplify individual impact.

Example 2:
Jeanne Commits to "Social Activism"

August (*see Figure 3*): Jeanne draws herself as a shadowy figure within a planet bristling with plants of all descriptions and surrounded with every sort of weather.

I am part—I am a child—I am a grown-up—I am part of nature—I am part of this world—the world is a child—the world is grownup—the world is part of nature—to sustain we must find equilibrium—I AM looking.

On the back she adds,

I'd like to help be an active participant in the equilibrium of the world. VERY IDEALISTIC VIEW! Too broad?

May (*see Figure 4*): Polka-dotted with red and orange circles of "light," and strewn with a crossword maze made up of words such as *Awareness, Humble, Facilitate, Change*, and *LEARNING*, Jeanne's drawing is entitled "One of 6.1 Billion Points of Light." In her narrative she writes,

One person among many/ One voice among many/ The choice to have voice/ The humility to lead without ego or prejudice.

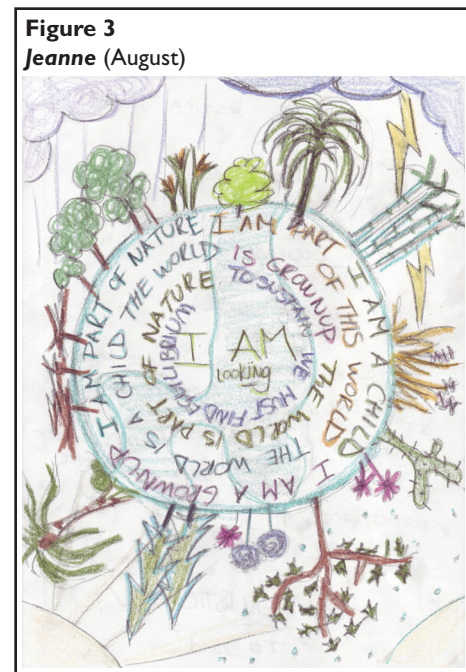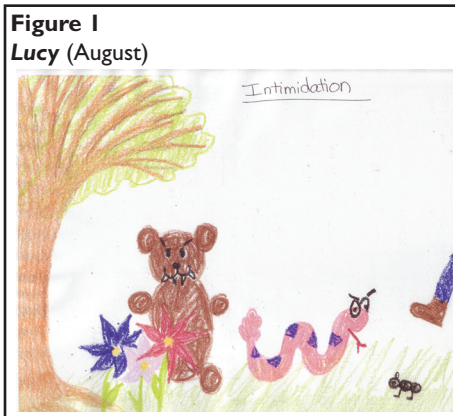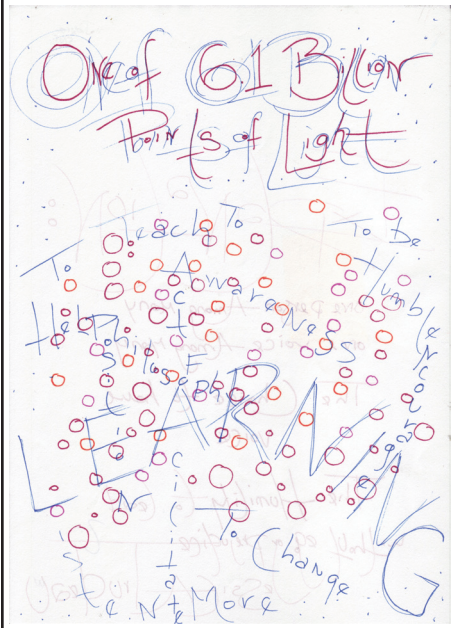Jeanne began with a representation of a highly interconnected world seeking the

Figure 3
Jeanne (August)

Figure 4
Jeanne (May)

equilibrium that she herself sought, and she had the perspicacity to suspect herself of idealism. However, she was not intent on effecting change, but on achieving a comfortable stasis. Her first drawing was strictly focused on the natural world, with no direct reference to humans or even to society in general. Now she represents 6.1 billion people in her drawing, and fills the page with nouns, verbs, and adjectives related to transformational action, suggesting both a commitment to *social activism* and the ability to have an *impact*.

While still idealistic, the visual impression here is hardly one of "equilibrium." Her *connectedness* continues, but now strongly based in communion with humanity rather than with "nature," reflecting some movement toward *collectivity*. Though she is "one voice among many," she perceives her own "choice to have voice," to take action, even "to lead" (and, one might speculate, to disturb the world's equipoise just a bit).

Example 3:
Carol Engages "Self-transformation"

August (*see Figure 5*): Carol's description:

I am a yellow drop of color being added to the wider society which is represented as a bowl of blue frosting. As time passes and the frosting is stirred, I influence the frosting (people) closest to me. Slowly that influence influences more frosting and so on and I have impacted society, some parts more than others, just by being there and relating with others.

Carol draws a three-part story board, showing the yellow drop, first separate but falling into the bowl of "frosting," then lodged in the frosting, and finally somewhat merged, with a greenish tinge spreading out from her yellow drop.

May (*see Figure 6*): Carol now fills the page with shelves of books beneath a sign saying "Public Library." Five out of perhaps 200 books are colored blue to indicate that she has read them. She writes:
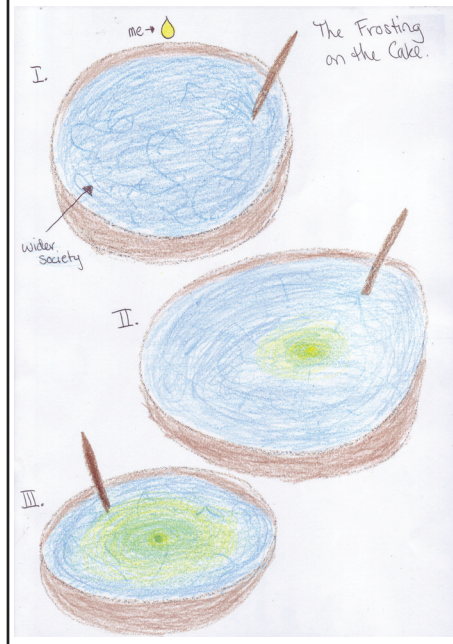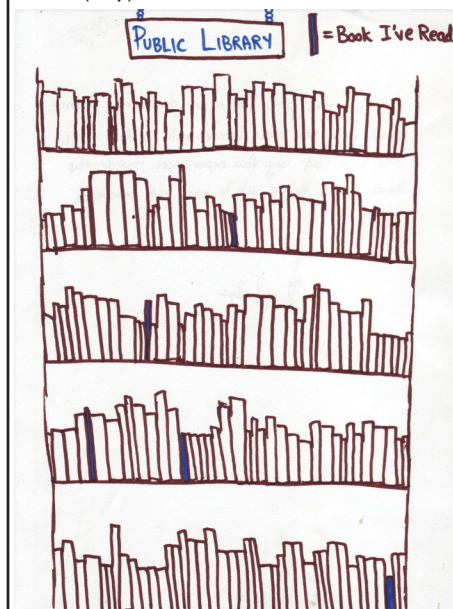
Figure 5
Carol (August)

Figure 6
Carol (May)

In the public library of the world, I have read very few books, learned only a few things, and have had very few experiences. However, this leaves many things yet to learn and experience.

In a curious departure, Carol does not exactly portray herself in relation to society in this later drawing, but represents her own inexperience and need for more understanding and knowledge. A young woman just out of college, she began the year with a well developed sense of *connectedness* to the wider society, along with a somewhat naive belief in her own ability to influence that society merely though passive propinquity with those around her.

By May she has found out how much she didn't know, and how much she still needs to learn. She still retains her optimism about the future and about her place in the world, but perhaps now with a more realistic assessment of the need for *self-transformation* in order to move society forward.

Example 4:
Karen Embraces "Collectivity"

August (*see Figure 7*): Showing a single tree on a grassy bank counterpoised by its symmetrical reflection, Karen's drawing is entitled "The Life of a Tree Reflecting in the Water." On the back she notes that the tree stands for growth and for interconnectedness and interdependence with light, water, sun. The tree has needs, but it also has gifts (fruit) to offer. The reflection of the tree in the water connotes that
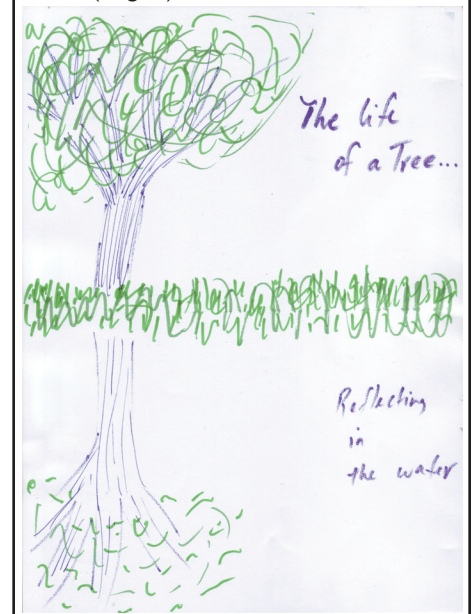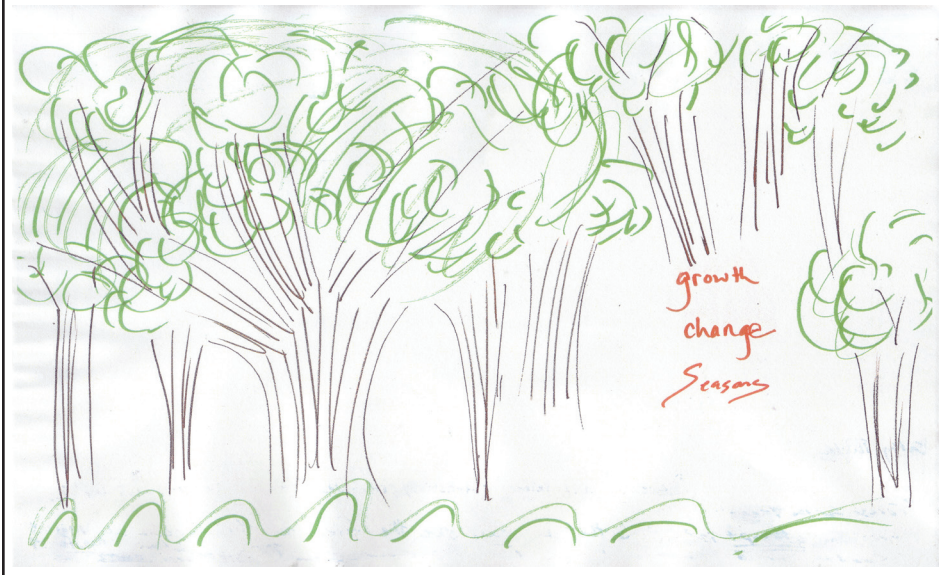
Figure 7
Karen (August)

Figure 8
Karen (May)

"what I want to see in the world I have to be, have to foster."

May (*see Figure 8*): The page is filled by a forest of trees, with the words *growth*, *change*, *seasons*. Karen's narrative provides the title: "Forest for the Trees," and explains that she

can see the forest for the trees—well, more of the forest: seeds, growth, seasons, leaves—change, life—foundation, source, ROOTS.

Karen's highly developed sense of *connectedness* is evident from the first drawing. In this earlier drawing she also recognized the importance of *self-transformation* in pursuit of societal change: "What I want to see in the world I have to *be*." She returns to an arboreal image in the later drawing, but it is now more inclusive and communal, with the whole forest in place of a single, literally reflective, perhaps self-absorbed tree. The *collectivity* present in this image contrasts with the individualism in her earlier drawing.

Conclusions

Berman (1993) used the metaphorical image activity in conjunction with personal interviews to flush out individuals' perceptions of their relationship to society in his study of the factors affecting the development of social responsibility, or "the personal investment in the well-being of others and the planet." His research demonstrated that "throughout childhood and adolescence, young people are formulating a theory of how society works and negotiating their relationship with society," and further that active engagement in social change is enabled "not by the traditional theoretical constructs of efficacy and locus of control, but by much deeper sources," including "the sense of connectedness to others, and the meaning that one derives from contributing to something larger than oneself."

In the WEL program we have found the metaphorical drawing activity to be a fruitful way to access some highly abstract but very crucial components in a transformative process that members of the dominant group[3] must undergo in order to enable them to participate in meaningful social-economic change. Can it also be used to help gauge the existence, extent, and depth of individual transformation?

The foregoing analyses of the drawings was naturally informed by a year spent working closely with these students, including many discussions, written reflections, and other evidence of their inner struggles and achievements. One should be skeptical of any tool that purports to evaluate reliably and independently something as complex, personal, and individual as self-transformation.

However, this activity could help elucidate aspects of the inner work while also advancing that work. Because it calls upon resources and mental processes that are significantly different from those involved in oral discussions or written papers, insights may be gained that are not available through more "left-brained" tasks. While appraisal of inner transformation is inevitably subjective at best, this activity, used in conjunction with other evidence, appears to provide both insight and documentation, enriching the impressions of faculty and the self reports of students.

Notes

[1] Before the August summer institute, students will have done some required independent reading and reflecting, but have not received any direct instruction from faculty other than one orientation session in mid-May. Their initial drawings may reflect to some extent the readings they have been exposed to over the summer (for example Rodney (1981), Zinn (2003), Takaki (1993), Tatum (1997)), but the bulk of the deep intra-personal work still lies ahead.

[2] Pseudonyms have been used to preserve anonymity.

[3] Situated in rural New Hampshire, the WEL student population is predominantly Euro-American.

References

Berman, S. H. (1990). Educating for social responsibility. *Educational Leadership,* November 1990, 75-80.

Berman, S. H. (1993). The development of social responsibility (moral behavior). Unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Darling-Hammond, L., French, J., & Garcia-Lopez, S. P. (Eds.). (2002). *Learning to teach for social justice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2001). *Crossing over to Canaan.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Liston, D., & Zeichner, K. (1996). *Culture and teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Nieto, S. (2000). Placing equity front and center: Some thoughts on transforming teacher education for a new century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *51*(3), 180-187.

Reed, J., & Black, D. (2006). Toward a pedagogy of transformative teacher education: World Educational Links. *Multicultural Education*, *14*(2), 34-41.

Rodgers, C. (2006). "The turning of one's soul"—Learning to teach for social justice: The Putney Graduate School of Teacher Education (1950-1964). *Teachers College Record,* 108(7), 1266-1295.

Rodney, W. (1981). *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Washington, DC: Howard University Press.

Takaki, R. (1993). *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America.* Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?"* New York: Basic Books.

Weiler, K. (2002). Teacher education and social justice. *Radical Teacher*, Fall. http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0JVP/is_2002_Fall/ai_92840302

Zinn, H. (2003). *A people's history of the United States: 1492-present.* New York: Perennial Classics.