
Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Becoming a Social Justice Educator through Critical Action



“Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”

(Freire, 1985, p. 122)



Did You Know

More Than A March: Authentic Social Justice Advocacy and Transformative Change

The title of “Social Justice Warrior” has become a popular way to identify or be identified as a person engaging in acts of what many perceive to be social justice advocacy (Hyttten & Bettez, 2011). “Social Justice Warriors” may participate in traditional forms of advocacy, such as marches, walk outs, and display signs or stickers to signal “inclusion.” Many educators who work towards achieving equity in both their professional and personal lives may consider themselves to be social justice warriors. Such individuals who are members of dominant groups and have identity privilege (i.e. people who are non-disabled, Christian, cisgender, heterosexual, English speakers, male, and/or White identity) may possess a philosophical desire to do what is right, moral, and ethical in an attempt to create a more equitable and inclusive society for those who have been denied access, opportunities, and acceptance on the basis of their social identities. Educators model, inform, and influence their students’ thoughts, language, and behaviors in seen and unseen ways. Thus, the manner in which educators engage in social justice advocacy is important not only to support societal changes but also to role model for students who are finding their own agency in social activism.

On the surface individuals considering themselves to be social justice warriors by participating in marches, walk outs, and other performance type of activism may not appear problematic. However, one critique of so called “social justice warriors” is that in spite of their pursuit of lasting and systemic change these individuals often continue to perpetuate the same inequities they oppose (Hyttten & Bettez, 2011). In fact, individuals who possess privileged identities may view traditional forms of advocacy as beneficial and liberating, while members of historically marginalized communities may view these efforts as harmful and oppressive (Edwards, 2006).

One major problem is when people from dominant groups value their self-identity as a social justice warrior without *actually* engaging in actions that disrupt White supremacy, homophobia, ableism or patriarchy in their own local spaces and interactions (Leonard & Misumi, 2016). An example of this is an educator who believes himself to be an advocate for racial justice, posts on social media in support of the Black Lives Matter movement to create awareness, but remains quiet when a colleague uses deficit language to discuss a Black student and their family in a team meeting. These individuals who claim solidarity with marginalized communities and seek attention (e.g. wearing a safety pin on one’s sleeve) and accolades for their participation in activism but neglect to speak out against racism, sexism, xenophobia etc. within their own social circles are engaging in performance advocacy at the expense of members of marginalized groups (Leonard & Misumi, 2016; McKenzie, 2013).

In reality, although heightened visibility of those within the dominant culture at social justice events may encourage their peers to attend, optics do very little to effect lasting and meaningful change (Edwards, 2006).

Systemic and transformative change towards equity only happens when individuals are willing and courageous enough to engage in difficult dialogues around power, privilege, positionality, and the historical nature of oppression towards marginalized groups (DiAngelo, 2011). Membership within dominant cultures affords individuals the privilege of choosing to engage with others around issues of equity and inclusion or ignore those issues all together (Edwards, 2006). When the majority of dominant culture community members choose the latter, discussing such issues may become “taboo,” a breach of social etiquette, or these issues may simply be considered “other people’s problems.”



Why It Matters

Achieving Meaningful Change Requires Every Piece to Be in Place

Advocacy is an important catalyst for change. The need for authentic social justice advocacy by those with identity privilege is a necessary part of promoting systemic change (Clemons, 2017). Additionally, when educators who are members of dominant groups authentically engage in social justice advocacy by having critical conversations with other educators, they demonstrate the importance of surfacing matters of inequity and barriers to opportunities and academic achievement (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014). By identifying and addressing problematic behaviors and beliefs, social justice minded educators can make perceivable hidden norms, and critically interrogate school policies, practices and procedures that perpetuate systemic oppressions in schools (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014).

When authentic social justice advocacy is modeled by educators for students, students gain an awareness that true advocacy means illuminating issues that impact historically marginalized individuals in negative ways (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014). Students learn that raising awareness of inequities and addressing deficit attitudes and perspectives may require engaging in difficult conversations with friends and family (Clemons, 2017). Social justice educators who engage their students in critical conversations around difference assist in demystifying issues not typically discussed in schools or within dominant society (Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2014). By encouraging open and honest dialogues educators can help to create a healthy dissidence to the dehumanizing messages students may derive from media, movies, music, peers, and family about members of non-dominant groups. Educators who demonstrate authentic social activism can help students learn to value the importance of listening and learning from the lived experiences of their non-dominant peers. All students learn to question the status quo and how to critically examine policies, practices, and structures that serve as barriers to achieving equity for everyone. Authentic social justice educators assist students in understanding that the liberation of all people is bound together regardless of group membership (Freire, 1985). Authentic social justice educators accept that they have a moral and practical responsibility to prepare students for life. This means not only ensuring that students have the requisite skills necessary to become productive members of society, but also making students aware that they have a responsibility to make the world a better place for all groups of people.



For Equity Now

Becoming an Authentic Social Justice Advocate Requires Hard Work

As in the development of most proficiencies, more than passion is needed to engage in the integral work of authentic social justice advocacy; social justice advocacy requires practice and skill (DiAngelo, 2011). Particularly for members of the dominant group, authentic social justice advocacy means engaging members of one's *own* group and community in critical conversations around cultural and socio-historical marginalization (racism, religious indifference, ableism, homophobia, gender bias, linguist bias, sexism, etc.). Educators engaging in authentic social justice advocacy must demonstrate both the ability and willingness to engage in consistent critical self-reflective practices (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2012). Educators must be open and transparent about their biases and the ways in which they are complicit in systemic oppression. The first step towards authentic social justice advocacy is for individuals to engage in an examination of self and consider the ways in which power and privilege advantage some students in their classrooms, while simultaneously disadvantaging others (Hyland, 2009).

Educators must examine their classroom practices, including (but not limited to) assumptions about: 1. students and students' abilities, 2. what is traditionally considered knowledge, and 3. whose knowledge and skills are traditionally considered valuable and why (Hyland, 2009). Individuals with identity privilege must interrogate the origins of their beliefs, the pervasiveness of those beliefs within the larger society, and the ways in which their beliefs have been/are normalized (Hytten & Bettez, 2011).

Some additional considerations for authentic social justice educators are:

1. To understand that the purpose of an authentic social justice educator is to strive towards educational equity. A transformative approach to equity is needed to promote systemic change (Skelton & Kyser, 2015).
2. To understand that there are no "quick fix" solutions. Be aware that most matters of inequity are deeply rooted in history and rushing to fix an issue without having an awareness of context may result in further harm to marginalized individuals (Clemons, 2017).
3. To understand that the voices, goals, beliefs, lived experiences etc. of marginalized individuals must be acknowledged, valued, respected, and centered (Clemons, 2017).
4. To understand and accept your own culpability in the oppression of marginalized individuals (Hytten & Bettez, 2011).
5. To be open and transparent about the ways in which the marginalization of non-dominant groups has/does benefit those within dominant cultures, including self (Castagno, 2014).

6. To be aware of how your power and privilege benefit you daily (Castagno, 2014).
7. To educate yourself about the many types of oppressions experienced by members of the non-dominant culture (Castagno, 2014).
8. To examine the multiple ways in which oppression and inequity reverberate through marginalized families and communities (Castagno, 2014).
9. To understand that marginalized individuals are the experts of their own realities (Clemons, 2017).
10. To be aware of the intersectional nature of oppression and understand that individuals may identify as both members of a dominant group and members of a marginalized group (e.g. White and transgender or African American and male).
11. To be aware that authentic social justice educators are individuals who engage in critical conversations with their peers, their colleagues, their family members, and all others within their sphere of influence (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).
12. To understand that authentic advocacy is not something one simply does, rather it is a way of life and it requires both dedication and commitment (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Meet the Authors

This January 2019 issue of *Equity Dispatch* was written and edited by:
**Tammera S. Moore, Erin K. Sanborn, Robin G. Jackson, Zelideh R. Martinez Hoy,
Seena M. Skelton, and Kathleen King Thorius**

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