Equity Dispatch

Constructing Social Justice in Education: The Current Context

GREAT LAKES EQUITY CENTER

June 2015

IMPACT: *Educate, Engage, Empower - for Equity*

(Click words to navigate to sections)

"The educator has the duty of not being neutral."

~ Paulo Freire

Meet the Authors

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Educate

Introduction

Education rests within a greater context of inequality in wealth (McKernan et al, 2015), housing (Bischoff, 2010), and health (Weir, 2013). Past and current legacies of these persistent gaps should trouble how we define and understand the term, social justice.

Public systems in the U.S., concerned with the common welfare of citizens, have a long history of tensions in serving all fairly. These tensions often surface in dealing with difference regarding race, class, gender, dis/ability, language, national origin, and religion. In the public education system, disparities in the allocation of educational resources frequently follow along racial and economic lines (Reardon, 2011) Institutionalized in many systems across the country through policy, patterns of practice and long held beliefs, biases that contribute to inequitable

Equity Spotlight

educational opportunities for students are necessarily manifested in the disparities seen in student outcomes.

In addition, these struggles point to a socio-historic legacy of domination and resistance. (Freire, 2000) where in which some have the power to decision-make and others, which do not, grow more opposed to the status quo. Previous and current legacies cultivate a landscape of decisions being made about public systems, which often negatively impact people of color, people with dis/abilities, and people living in under-resourced communities; and encroach upon civil and human rights yet are often intended to do the opposite. One may argue that these tensions, this paradox arises from the pursuit of a deeper promise, a deeper ideology of equity and democracy, of the American dream. This pursuit complicates meritocracy and activates the simultaneous influence of the past and present on the future (Pinar, 2011; Slattery, 2012), specifically as it relates to the concept of social justice.

What is Social Justice?

Social Justice concerns itself with the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and rights within a society. Some have defined social justice as a matter of fairness (Rawls, 2003) in that people "freely enter into an agreement to follow certain rules for the betterment of everyone, without considering the implications of these rules for their own selfish gain" (Robinson, n.d.). Some have defined social justice as a matter of citizen support of fairness (Miller, 2003). Thus, distribution of wealth, opportunities, and rights should be fair according to a society's citizens, but paradoxically the citizen should not concern themselves with how they will be directly impacted. These two concepts elucidate tricky associations of fairness, particularly as they relate to constructs of equality and equity.

Equality is treating everyone the same. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful (Sun, 2014). Both focus to promote fairness, however equality is ineffective if individuals have different combination of needs and resources. Equity situates the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and rights within the varied and complex spectrum of needs. This troubles previous understandings of social justice as a matter of fairness in the distribution of wealth, opportunity, and resources as determined by a majority (Fraser, 1995) and expands social justice as a term "that integrates concern for socioeconomic redistribution, for legal and cultural recognition, as well as -- now explicitly integrating the political -- for representation" (Fraser, 2008; Kerner, 2010, p. 43). In short, social justice should examine the systemic structures and ideologies that justify inequalities (García & Guerra, 2004).

Dr. David Stovall is an Associate Professor of Educational Policy Studies and African-American Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). His scholarship investigates four areas 1) Critical Race Theory, 2) concepts of social justice in education 3) the relationship between housing and education and 4) the relationship between schools and community stakeholders. In the attempt to bring theory to action, he has spent the last ten years working with community organizations and schools to develop curriculum that addresses issues of social justice.

His current work has led him to become a member of the Greater Lawndale/Little Village School of Social Justice High School design team, which he serves

Affected by past and current often discriminatory social policy and practices, not everyone is afforded equal opportunity to start at the same place, and not everyone has the same needs (Sun, 2014). What implications should be considered for educators in the school community? How does revisiting the term social justice by troubling what we mean by fairness assist educators in addressing the needs of different learners in the classroom or in decision and choice making on school policy?

Current State of Education and Contemporary Injustices

The U.S. public education system struggles to ensure all students are equitably served. Gaps persist in access to high quality instruction (Olson, 2003; Sunderman & Kim, 2005; Peske & Haycock, 2006), curriculum, facilities (Spatig-Amerikaner, 2012), and safety that meets the needs of each student. These gaps are present despite the presence of federal legislation intended to protect students based on dis/ability, gender and gender expression, income, race/ethnicity, language diversity, and national origin (Great Lakes, 2015). Thus, outcome gaps in achievement and discipline persist (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008; Skiba, Shure, Middelberg, & Baker, 2011; Duncan, 2014; Noltemeyer & Mcloughlin, 2010; Hinojosa, 2008).

Toward Reconstructing Social Justice

Our current context -- post-Civil Rights Act, legislative actions demanding equity for protected classes -- demonstrate and call for a reconstruction of the concept of social justice, one that does not move beyond the term, but revisits it and reexamines its meaning (Great Lakes a, 2012). Taking a deeper reflection toward what we mean by social justice, particularly in the context of public education, asking: How do we establish a more meaningful definition of social justice?

Perhaps a start is to critically reflect on the socio-historic legacy of groups of people not benefitting from and being oppressed by U.S. public systems (Lipman, 2012). Secondly, in addition to examining the extent to which school policies, practices, traditions, beliefs, and languages contribute to differential treatment that negatively effects particular student groups, also developing deep practices of critical self-reflection (Great Lakes, 2012) are crucial. "Self-examination about the effects of oppressive socialization in our lives is a never-ending learning process. We all have areas of limited vision, particularly where we are members of the advantaged group and have been taught to assume

as a volunteer social studies teacher. In his work with the Social Justice High School, Dr. Stovall, along with fellow professor, plans social studies units that engage students in a critical understanding of historical events and the larger sociopolitical context in which these events occur.

Some of the major successes he has witnessed as educators center curriculum and instruction in social justice is the deep connections students make to when they are learning about issues relevant to their lives (personal communication, April 23, 2015).

Upcoming Events

(click on event name for more information)

Illinois
August 7, 2015
CEC Annual Summer Institute
Naperville, IL

our own experiences as normative. When we stay open to ongoing learning, and accept the inevitable mistakes as we uncover new areas of ignorance or lack of awareness, our students can learn to do so as well. Such self-awareness supports the long view needed to sustain our commitments and not retreat from this difficult but vital work" (Bell et al, 2010, p. 385).

And finally, embracing self-recovery (hooks, 1989; Lorde, 2007) provides a means to sustain oneself through the critical examinations of society and of the self (Batters, 2011). For example, in pursuing social justice, "i]t is necessary for previously [marginalized] groups to participate fully in decisions about how the principles of distribution and recognition should be defined and implemented" (Cribb & Gewirtz, 2003, p. 19). However, in implementation, this ideal is extremely complex given the intersections of oppressions (Freire, 2000), thus the persistence of critical reflecting on public systems, self-reflection, and self-recovery allow a long term approach toward defining social justice in one's education context(s).

Conclusion

Educators can create spaces in order to grapple with and define what social justice means in their context(s) during professional development, committee work, teaching, strategic planning, and collaboratively reflecting, and interfacing with parents/caregivers and community partners. Discussions of social justice in education must move beyond the misperceived barrier that pressures of academic achievement are at direct odds with curriculum and practices which focus on social justice. Definitions of social justice must move beyond work force-oriented perspectives on schooling, which stresses education for jobs (Zajda, 2006), to one where the traditional model of schooling becomes a pathway in developing agency and learning toward self-determination. There exists a great opportunity in "see[ing] educational practice as sites of justice [and] not merely injustice" (Cribbs and Gerwitz, 2003, p. 28). By viewing students as well as educators as equal participants, students are afforded the opportunity to be active global citizens and persistent critical thinkers (White & Talbert, 2005).

Engage

SOCIAL JUSTICE HIGH SCHOOL

Social Justice High School is a public high school located in the South Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. Also known as "SOJO," Social Justice High School was created in 2001 when 14 Little Village residents endured a 19-day hunger strike in an effort to secure a new school in their neighborhood. In fall 2005, SOJO and three other small schools opened in a new building that serves the Little Village and North Lawndale neighborhoods. Located on the Little Village Lawndale High School campus, all four schools are public, neighborhood schools, open to every student within the boundary area. Although the some of the facilities are shared, each learning community is specific to the theme of the schools. SOJO is based on seven essential expectations: unity, respect, self-discipline, excellence, service, honesty and ownership and being prompt and prepared.

As a neighborhood school that serves the surrounding communities, SOJO inspires students to cherish and preserve their ethnic and cultural identity. At SOJO, students are encouraged to become critical thinkers through a rigorous and innovative curriculum and meaningful school relationships. Learning addresses real world issues: race, gender, culture, economic equity, peace, justice, and the environment through problem-based projects. SOJO grew from a belief that every child has a right to a quality education, and so learning centers on serving the community and city as well. At SOJO, students are expected to graduate high school, be prepared for college and plan for a post-secondary education.

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Empower

Something to Watch!

Reframing the Gap:
Educational Debt and the
Responsibility of Socially Conscious
*Educators in Troubling Times*

Dr. David Stovall

This video, divided into three parts, is Dr. David Stovall's keynote for the Second Annual Racial Initiatives for Students and Educators (R.I.S.E.) Symposium. Dr. Stovall discusses the intersections of housing policies, the criminal justice system, local and national politics, economics and education. He raises questions about how these intersections affect schooling, who benefits, and who is excluded. Additionally, Dr. Stovall challenges educators to shift from a focus on theory to a focus on action for equity.

Something to Do!

Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education

Paul C. Gorski and Seema G. Pothini
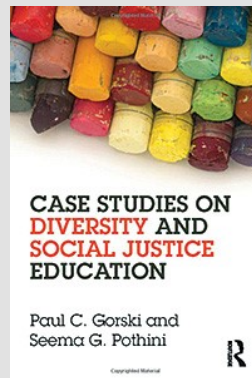
This collection of case studies allows educators and other stakeholders to explore ways in which racism, sexism, homophobia and heterosexism, class inequity, language bias, religious-based oppression, and other equity issues present themselves in daily school life. Furthermore, the authors have provided a framework for how to use case studies, and each case ends with a discussion guide and facilitator notes.

Something to Read!

They Deserve Good Teaching, Too: Social Justice in a Classroom for Students with Autism

Leanna Carollo

In this short Rethinking Schools article, Leanna Carollo advocates for an asset-based pedagogy for students with autism. Carollo critiques the dominant method for teaching students with severe autism. Instead, Carollow argues, educators should be learning students' strengths and using those strengths to help students with autism access the curriculum. The result is a more humanizing pedagogy that recognizes and validates students' voices.

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