

Understanding Education for Social Justice

By Kathy Hytten
& Silvia C. Bettez

Kathy Hytten is a professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education in the College of Education and Human Services at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois. Silvia C. Bettez is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina.

What does it mean to foreground social justice in our thinking about education? It has become increasingly common for education scholars to claim a social justice orientation in their work (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Michelli & Keiser, 2005). At the same time, education programs seem to be adding statements about the importance of social justice to their mission, and a growing number of teacher education programs are fundamentally oriented around a vision of social justice (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002; McDonald, 2005; Zollers, Albert, & Cochran-Smith, 2000). Murphy (1999) names social justice as one of “three powerful synthesizing paradigms” (p. 54) in educational leadership while Zeichner (2003) offers it as one of three major approaches to teacher education reform. The phrase social justice is used in school mission statements, job announcements, and educational reform proposals, though sometimes

Understanding Education for Social Justice

widely disparate ones, from creating a vision of culturally responsive schools to leaving no child behind.

Despite all the talk about social justice of late, it is often unclear in any practical terms what we mean when we invoke a vision of social justice or how this influences such issues as program development, curricula, practicum opportunities, educational philosophy, social vision, and activist work. In the abstract, it is an idea that is hard to be against. After all, we learn to pledge allegiance to a country that supposedly stands for “liberty and justice for all.” Yet the more we see people invoking the idea of social justice, the less clear it becomes what people mean, and if it is meaningful at all. When an idea can refer to almost anything, it loses its critical purchase, especially an idea that clearly has such significant political dimensions. In fact, at the same time that we are seeing this term in so many places, we are also seeing a backlash against it; for example, just recently the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education removed social justice language from its accrediting standards because of its controversial, ambiguous, and ideologically weighted nature (Wasley, 2006). Among the critiques, education that is grounded on a commitment to justice and the cultivation of democratic citizenship “is increasingly seen as superfluous, complicating, and even threatening by some policy makers and pressure groups who increasingly see any curriculum not tied to basic literacy or numeracy as disposable and inappropriate” (Michelli & Keiser, 2005, p. xix).

Despite some of the current confusion and tensions, there is a long history in the United States of educators who foreground social justice issues in their work and who argue passionately for their centrality to schooling in a democratic society. We see this in a variety of places, for example in Counts’ (1932) call for teachers to build a new social order, in Dewey’s work on grounding education in a rich and participatory vision of democracy, and in the work of critical pedagogues and multicultural scholars to create educational environments that empower historically marginalized people, that challenge inequitable social arrangements and institutions, and that offer strategies and visions for creating a more just world. Describing education for social justice, Bell (1997) characterizes it as “both a process and a goal” with the ultimate aim being “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (p. 3). Hackman (2005) writes that “social justice education encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments” (p. 103). Murrell (2006) argues that social justice involves “a disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment extant in the practices and policies of institutions, as well as a fealty to participatory democracy as the means of this action” (p. 81). These visions are also consistent with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) call for schools to develop justice-oriented citizens who look at social, political, and economic problems systemically and engage in collective strategies for change.

There are multiple discourses that educators draw upon when claiming a social justice orientation. These include democratic education, critical pedagogy, mul-

ticulturalism, poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory, anti-oppressive education, cultural studies, postcolonialism, globalization, and critical race theory. While often these are overlapping and interconnected discourses, this is not always the case, and the strength that might come from dialogue across seemingly shared visions can be compromised. Thus it seems useful to tease out more clearly what we mean when we claim a social justice orientation, especially so that we can find places where the beliefs, theories and tools we do share can be brought to bear on a more powerful, and, ultimately, more influential vision of educating for social justice—one that can better challenge the problematic growth of conservative, neoliberal, and many would argue, unjust, movements in education (see, for example, Apple, 2001 & 1996).

Our goal in this article is to sort through the social justice literature in education in order to develop a better understanding of what this work is all about and why it is important. Better understanding the types of work done under the banner of social justice may help us to more productively work together across differences and amid the variety of ways we are committed to social justice. Here we share Carlson and Dimitriadis's (2003) desire to develop a more powerful and "strategically unified progressive vision of what education can and should be" (p. 3) that ideally can emerge when we find ways to work together despite different passions and while keeping alive real tensions. Throughout our article, we aim to provide some useful orientation and framework to characterize what has been written about education for social justice and the theories, passions and agendas that inform it. We offer five broad strands or usages of social justice in the education literature. We don't claim these as the only or the best way to make sense of the literature, nor do we see these categories as mutually exclusive. Rather, they provide an entry point into the literature that can help us to better understand and frame some of our goals in working for social justice.

Defining Social Justice

Novak (2000) argues that some of the difficulty we have making sense of social justice starts with the term itself. He writes that "whole books and treatises have been written about social justice without ever offering a definition of it. It is allowed to float in the air as if everyone will recognize an instance of it when it appears" (p. 1). Moreover, almost everyone in education seems to share at least a rhetorical commitment to social justice, especially as we routinely express the belief that schools should help to provide equality of opportunity. Rizvi (1998) argues that "the immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have a single essential meaning—it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavors" (p. 47). This difficulty can also be seen as educators struggle with social justice when they attempt to put a commitment to this idea into practice. For example, Moule (2005) describes how she and her colleagues placed a social justice vision statement on the first page of their teacher education program

Understanding Education for Social Justice

handbook, yet after they all agreed upon the statement, there was little discussion of how it would be implemented in practice and who would be responsible for what.

Differing perceptions of what social justice meant, from changing individual perspectives to undertaking specific actions, led to uneven levels of commitment. In particular, as a Black woman, Moule was expected to bear the brunt of efforts at changing their program. Zollers, Albert, and Cochran-Smith (2000) also found that despite a unanimously shared goal of teaching for social justice within their teacher education program, they and their colleagues had a range of different understandings and definitions of social justice that complicated their efforts. They identified three categories where they shared commitments but had differing beliefs about what those commitments actually meant. For example, they all agreed that “fairness is the sine qua non of a socially just society” (p. 5) but defined fairness in divergent ways, from meaning sameness or equal distribution to meaning equitable, though potentially different, treatment. They also agreed that change was necessary, but varied in their ideas about the locus of that change, holding positions on a continuum from looking at individual responsibility to focusing on institutional responsibility. Similarly, in terms of the actual work of implementing social justice, their beliefs ranged on a continuum from changing individual assumptions and perspectives to engaging in collective action.

Given that there is both confusion and conceptual looseness in the social justice literature, one thing that seems useful is to get a better sense of how people are calling upon this idea and the range of priorities and visions they hold. It is difficult to sort through the social justice literature with any real confidence as so many different discourses and theoretical movements claim a social justice vision, sometimes centrally and sometimes peripherally. Sifting through a wide range of literature on this topic, we found it heuristically useful to divide the vast body of work into five different strands or categories, though we are certainly aware that these categories often blend together and are interpenetrating and overlapping. Yet at the same time, they provided us with a useful orientation for thinking about the various visions and goals that exist under the broad umbrella of education for social justice. We sort the literature into works that are primarily philosophical/conceptual, practical, ethnographic/narrative, theoretically specific, and democratically grounded. We describe each of these strands in turn, looking at some of their contributions and limitations in terms of the larger goal of educating for social justice.

Philosophical/Conceptual

Writings in the philosophical or conceptual strand of the literature aim to tease out the meaning of justice in abstract, philosophical and/or theoretical terms. One of the most commonly cited pieces in this vein is Iris Marion Young’s (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, which comes out of philosophical and political theory. Concerned with the meaning that contemporary leftist social movements (e.g., those aiming to empower women, Blacks, American Indians, gays and lesbians) have for our understandings of justice, Young engages in a reflective discourse

about the broad notion of justice. Her philosophical approach entails “clarifying the meaning of concepts and issues, describing and explaining social relations, and articulating and defending ideals and principles” (p. 5). She begins by challenging a distributive notion of justice, saying it obscures systemic and structural inequities. She then moves to the section of her book that is most often excerpted and cited in the education literature, characterization of five faces of oppression. Here she talks about the systemic, hegemonic and structural nature of oppression. She argues that oppression is built into our policies, procedures and institutions; it is more than simply the result of individual actions. She writes that the causes of oppression “are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules” (p. 41). She goes on to offer us broad concepts to frame our thinking about oppression and injustice, including what she calls the faces of oppression (pp. 48-65): exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Educational philosophers, of course, have also drawn upon a number of classical philosophical discussions of justice and applied them to contemporary educational situations. For example, they have considered how Kant’s categorical imperative, Mill’s utilitarianism, or Rawls’ original position may help us to come up with criteria for making assessments or judgments about whether educational policies and practices are fair. In this vein, Rizvi (1998) identifies three broad philosophical traditions for thinking about social justice: liberal individualism, market individualism and social democratic (p. 48). The liberal individualist view, drawn heavily from Rawls, elevates fairness as the central feature of justice. Two principles of Rawls (1972) come into play in the liberal individualist perspective. First, each person is entitled to as much freedom as possible as long as others share the same freedom. Second, social goods should be distributed as equally as possible, with inequities being allocated in a way that benefits the least privileged members of society. Almost diametrically opposed to Rawls, the market individualist view of justice emphasizes that people are entitled in relationship to their efforts. Rizvi cites Nozick’s (1976) work to support this perspective on social justice which advocates that justice is measured by fair starting conditions. Rizvi (1998) writes that in this perspective, it is “the justice of the competition—that is, the way competition was carried out and not its outcome—that counts” (p. 49). The social democratic perspective, largely drawn from Marx, considers justice in relationship to the needs of various individuals, emphasizing a more collectivist or cooperative vision of society.

As this strand of writing is primarily philosophical, it relies heavily on offering broad criteria, principles, and constructs for thinking about justice. For example, we could see justice as a matter of distribution (how do we most equitably allocate resources and rewards), recognition (how do we create conditions in which all cultural ways of being are valued), opportunities (how do we ensure a level playing field for competition), and/or outcomes (how do we make certain that successes are fairly distributed in relation to populations). The goals in this strand of social justice work include defining terms, making distinctions, offering categories, grounding

Understanding Education for Social Justice

claims and tracing their implications. There are a variety of examples of writing in this genre, some of which also provide concrete and/or practical examples in relation to the categories that are offered. For instance, Lynch and Baker (2005) call for equality of condition as a central criterion of justice in education. They argue that we must look for equality in five dimensions: “resources; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning” (p. 132). Within each of these dimensions, they describe how we may change educational practices to support a more holistic vision of equality in education. Bell (1997) provides a set of lenses and terms, what she calls theoretical foundations, for social justice education. She offers a historical, conceptual, and contextual account of oppression, describing it as pervasive, restricting, hierarchical, complex, internalized, and systemic. She argues we need theoretical/conceptual accounts because they offer “clear ways to define and analyze oppression so that we can understand how it operates at various individual, cultural, and institutional levels” (p. 4).

The primary strength of the philosophical/conceptual strand of social justice work is that it helps us to get greater clarity about our assumptions, terms and visions. Too often we think because we are using the same term, for example, justice or democracy, we are talking about the same thing. Philosophical work on the meaning of such terms belies this belief and helps to remind us to be more careful about how we conceptualize and articulate our theories and practices. Yet at the same time, the abstract language of philosophy is often alienating and seemingly tangential to the everyday concerns of most educational practitioners. Typically when we teach about social justice, our students are least drawn to this kind of writing. They find it hard to enter the discourse and to apply seemingly abstract principles to their everyday lives and practice.

Practical

In contrast to the more abstract and philosophical writings on social justice, a second strand in the literature is very practical and experiential, offering criteria for what socially just practice in education would look like. Writers in this genre often offer lists of conditions or competencies, for example, of what would be present in a just school or in a teacher education program that is grounded on a vision of social justice, or of the competencies needed for socially just teaching or leadership. In terms of visions for just schools, Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) offer one such model, built on five principles. They argue that a just school would promote inclusion and equity, hold high expectations for all students, develop reciprocal community relationships, involve a system wide approach, and entail direct social justice education and intervention (pp. 57-61). Michelli and Keiser (2005) list six conditions, or action plans, that they claim “taken together, would reseed the notions of equity and social justice throughout teacher education” (p. 51). Such justice oriented teacher education programs would clearly define how they understand social justice and the challenges in actualizing it (especially in a climate dominated by calls for standardization); reinforce the potential for schools

to promote social justice in their everyday practices and policies; describe, promote and model successful existing practices and programs; deal proactively with the fears and concerns of prospective teachers when they confront perspectives different from their own; incorporate global perspectives and a better understanding of the dynamics of globalization into their programs; and organize and collaborate at a variety of different levels to support and defend public education (pp. 51-54).

Bettez (2008), in her discussion of university teaching, outlines seven skills, practices and dispositions of activist social justice education. These include: “(1) promoting a mind/body connection, (2) conducting artful facilitation that promotes critical thinking, (3) engaging in explicit discussions of power, privilege, and oppression, (4) maintaining compassion for students, (5) believing that change toward social justice is possible, (6) exercising self-care, and (7) building critical communities” (p. 276). Also speaking about competencies necessary for educators committed to social justice concerns, Hackman (2005) says there are five essential knowledge base components of social justice education. She argues that to educate for social justice, teachers need mastery of content in their discipline (including knowing factual information, having the ability to historically contextualize that information and being able to consider it in both micro and macro ways), tools for critical thinking and analysis, tools for social change and activism, tools for personal reflection (especially about one’s own power and privilege), and awareness of multicultural group dynamics (p. 104-108).

Grant and Gillette (2006) also claim that there are a number of knowledge bases necessary for effective, socially just teaching that supports the learning of all children. They suggest that teachers need to be culturally responsive in the classroom, to know themselves and be open to change, to hold a well-developed philosophy of education, to have substantial pedagogical content knowledge, to maintain an educational psychology that is multicultural, and to connect teacher education to the world outside of school. There are also skills that effective educators need such as the ability to be reflective, to analyze and act on teacher-generated research data, to communicate and collaborate, to build relationships, to arrange learning environments and to use technology as a teaching-learning tool. Complementing competencies for teachers, Marshall and Gerstl-Pepin (2005) suggest five leadership perspectives help to support social justice advocacy in schools. They claim that leaders must be critically pluralist and democratic, transformative, moral and ethical, feminist/caring, and spiritually/culturally responsive (pp. 268-271).

In addition to lists of components/attributes that would characterize socially just schools, leaders, and education programs, this strand of work also includes descriptions or models of programs oriented towards social justice. The most significant value of this practical strand of literature is that it provides specific examples of what schools have done and of what works in challenging inequities and creating more genuine equality of opportunity. These models of practice fill what many see as a practical gap in so much of the work in critical, leftist theory. Our students often lament that these models are missing in the more theoretical

Understanding Education for Social Justice

social justice literature, which they see as too idealistic, utopian and abstract. This work also provides some frameworks and criteria for thinking about how to assess the outcomes of our efforts at creating educational climates, policies and practices that are socially just. Yet while this type of writing provides hope, it is sometimes decontextualized and under theorized, making it hard to see how to translate examples from one place to the specific situations in which people find themselves, or how to create the momentum and support for such change in climates where there is not already a shared vision of working toward social justice. It is here where the qualitative detail and depth of ethnographic and narrative works can be particularly valuable in illustrating the fuller context of what it means to work for social justice.

Ethnographic/Narrative

A third strand in the social justice literature includes ethnographic and narrative works that offer portraits of injustice related to schools and education, reflections by educators committed to social justice, and narratives about personal experiences of lived injustice. Writings in this strand tend to be passionate and evocative. As opposed to creating categories and definitions, or offering broad principles for just practices, the primary focus of these works is to capture more vividly some lived consequences of injustice and to offer rich images of more just social and educational practices. We recognize, however, that such ethnographic and narrative pieces of course also often include philosophical, conceptual, practical and theoretical components, especially explicitly in sections on assumptions, data analysis and interpretation. The various strands we have sorted the literature into are not meant to be exclusive, and indeed, in many cases they are overlapping. Nonetheless, we feel that ethnographic and narrative writings read differently than some of the other types of social justice literature, serving perhaps some different primary (though surely complementary) functions than in the other strands. Thus it useful to consider some of the features of this genre of social justice work that make it unique.

Perhaps the most heavily cited ethnographic/journalistic chronicler of injustice in schools is Jonathan Kozol. From describing his early teaching experiences in Boston Public Schools in *Death at an Early Age* (1967) through his most recent work, *The Shame of the Nation* (2005), Kozol has been documenting the extreme inequities that exist in the educational opportunities provided to children in this country. In *Savage Inequalities* (1991), arguably his most well known work, Kozol describes his experiences visiting schools and neighborhoods in both the poorest and wealthiest cities in the United States. Using statistics, voices of children and teachers, descriptive images and personal narrative, Kozol offers a compelling portrait of the disparate school experiences of children, especially along lines of race and class. He characterizes the ways in which injustices are fueled by pervasive racial segregation, extreme social and institutional poverty, and willful neglect by those with wealth and power. Along with evocatively drawn images of both squalor and excess, he reflects on how disparities are created and maintained through state and federal social policy, inequitable funding and racism. Dismayed by a lack of

progress in creating more socially just educational opportunities in the decade after his research for *Savage Inequalities*, he returns to the conditions of schools in his latest work, *The Shame of the Nation* (2005). Here he reflects on his experiences visiting 60 schools in 11 different states over the course of five years. Throughout his portrayals of these schools, classrooms, teachers, and students, he passionately and indignantly laments that segregation is increasing rather than decreasing and that poor, minority children are increasingly unlikely to receive quality education in this country. Among other things, through his words and stories he aims to shock, move, provoke and inspire his readers to take action against the injustices he so powerfully recounts.

There are a number of other narrative and ethnographic works that can be included in this broad strand of evocative social justice literature. For example, in *Subtractive Schooling* (1999), an in-depth ethnographic study of a large inner city school in Houston, Angela Valenzuela argues that rather than building on their strengths, schools subtract resources from youth of Mexican descent. Through describing the experiences of students, teachers, and administrators, as well as providing thick descriptions of school rules and events, Valenzuela shows how assimilationist policies and practices contribute to the underachievement of Mexican students. Similarly, in *Of Borders and Dreams* (1996), Chris Carger describes the myriad barriers faced by a Mexican American student and his family as they try to achieve success in Chicago schools. More hopefully, other writings profile examples of what socially just teaching and learning can look like, and in so doing provide some sense of possibility. For instance, in *The Dreamkeepers* (1994), Gloria Ladson-Billings offers portraits of eight successful, culturally responsive teachers while in *See You When We Get There* (2005), Gregory Michie profiles five young teachers who are working for change in urban schools. This type of writing offers visions of what could be; “up-close looks at committed teachers and the spaces of hope they create in their classrooms” (Michie, 2005, p. 4).

In addition to ethnographies, there are a variety of other types of reflective, autobiographical and narrative works that address social justice issues, both in and out of schools. Often these works provide lenses into how injustice plays out in people’s everyday lives and thus they provide more personalized invitations into considering what it means to ground educational commitments in social justice. More so than heavily theoretical discourses, this narrative voice appeals especially to students and educators who are new to social justice as a framing lens as they are viscerally moved by experiences that are both resonant with, and foreign to, their own. There are a number of anthologies, books and readers within the broad social justice literature that contain personal stories of discrimination, marginalization, and the individual impact of systems of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia (e.g., Adams, et. al. 2000; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Gaskins, 1999; Landsman, 2001; Rothenberg, 2001; Tea, 2003; Thompson & Tyagi, 1996). There are also scholars who theorize largely through narrative, for example bell hooks. In her three books explicitly dedicated to education, *Teaching to Transgress* (1994),

Understanding Education for Social Justice

Teaching Community (2003), and *Teaching Critical Thinking* (2010) hooks tells personal stories of her life as a child in segregated schools and her experiences as a black woman teacher working to help students to transgress racism, classism, and sexism in order to move towards freedom and justice. Throughout her experiential stories, she steadfastly maintains the power of classroom spaces to compel social justice work, arguing that they are one of the most important locations “where individuals can experience support for acquiring a critical consciousness, for any commitment to end domination” (2003, p. 45).

The overriding goal of much of the writing in this strand is to increase understandings of personal experience related to difference and discrimination. Voices from experience often compel and move readers differently than the seemingly more abstract theories and arguments about justice. They call for connection on a personal level, for readers to see injustices and their consequences through the eyes of real people. When used in the classroom, narrative and personal writings help to promote self-reflection among students, particularly as they learn to locate and consider their own experiences in relation to narratives they read. Narratives also provide rich and contextual examples for what teachers might do in the field, either through positive accounts that can be followed as models or negative accounts that serve as warnings for what to avoid. Yet at the same time, one of the struggles people have with narrative writings involves knowing how to enter them and to speak with and back to them. It is often difficult to hear experiences of pain and suffering, and to see the ways we may be implicated in their reproduction and/or implicated in seeing others as simply victims of oppressive systems. Yet in connection with some of the other strands of social justice work, these narrative pieces help to keep human faces, real people, centrally positioned in our thinking about what it means to work for justice.

Theoretically Specific

A fourth strand of social justice work involves theoretical positions that are connected to specific leftist and/or radical movements within academia. Sometimes the link to education is overt and specific such as work by education scholars in critical pedagogy, Whiteness studies, anti-oppressive education and multiculturalism. Other times the connection happens less directly because rather than being located primarily within education, the justice-oriented theoretical positions emerge more directly from fields such as women’s studies, sociology, and ethnic studies. Education scholars subsequently draw upon these other disciplines to inform their work and teaching within the field of education. Social justice cuts across all of these leftist movements, but each movement has a different primary ideological home; thus the meaning of social justice may be interpreted differently within each of them and their central priorities vary. It is impossible to address all the specializations, movements, and disciplines which promote social justice in this article. Among others, these include multiculturalism, progressivism, critical theory, poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory, anti-oppressive education, democratic education, White-

ness theory, cultural studies, globalization, postcolonialism, critical race theory, Latino(a) crit, tribal crit, and ecojustice. Instead we highlight just three of the more prominent theoretically specific discourses in education—multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, and cultural studies—to illustrate some of the ways social justice issues are approached within more specifically named theoretical umbrellas.

In thinking about social justice in education, it is hard not to immediately think of work in multiculturalism as synonymous. Multiculturalism has a long standing history in the field of education. Its roots can be traced to the intercultural movement in the 1920s and 1930s (Montalto, 1982), the subsequent intergroup movement in the 1940s and 1950s (Taba, Brady, & Robinson, 1952) and the civil rights struggles in the 1960s (Banks, 1989). James Banks, one of the preeminent scholars in this field, offers five dimensions of multicultural education. He suggests (1993) that it involves integrating culturally diverse sources in the curriculum, attending to the ways in which social and cultural positionality influence knowledge construction, working to reduce prejudice, creating equitable teaching methods and techniques, and developing an empowering school culture and structure. The field of multicultural education continues to grow in a variety of directions, even as multicultural education scholars are united in their desire to transform oppression and expand educational opportunities for historically marginalized groups. Given its history, work in multicultural education, not surprisingly, pays particular attention to issues of racism, cultural reproduction, and White supremacy and aims at creating more culturally responsive models of teaching and learning as part of a larger vision of social justice. Such models, Gay (2000) argues, are validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (pp. 29-36). Most recently, more critical multiculturalists have focused their attention on disrupting white supremacy and capitalism, maintaining that these discourses significantly frame how we understand issues of cultural difference. For example, Sleeter (1996) argues that multicultural education should be a form of social activism that addresses white supremacy directly and that helps students understand the interconnections among power, privilege and opportunity.

Similar to multiculturalism, critical pedagogy invariably comes to mind as an educational movement aimed explicitly at transforming oppressive social structures. While there are a variety of traditions within critical pedagogy, they all share a broad objective “to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices” (McLaren, 2003, p. 186). Critical pedagogues draw inspiration from Paulo Freire’s work, most notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). In this now classic text, Freire argues that rather than helping people to become critically literate, reflective agents in the world, traditional “banking” (p. 80) education instead domesticates, dehumanizes and oppresses people. He offers an alternative vision for education that is built around problem-posing and is aimed at helping people to achieve conscientization, or the ability to “perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of

Understanding Education for Social Justice

reality” (Freire, 2000, p. 35). While issues of social justice are at the heart of work in critical pedagogy, scholars writing in this tradition are not always talking about education in the same ways as in some of the other genres of social justice work. In part, this is due to the specialized language and dense theory associated with work in critical pedagogy. In fact, some argue the language of critical pedagogy (e.g., relying heavily on concepts such as hegemony, reproduction, instrumental rationality, ideology, enlightenment, emancipation, etc.) is so abstract and obtuse that it is alienating to the very people it is trying to help empower, especially teachers who “often accuse those in critical pedagogy of speaking in academese” (Wink, 2005, p. 29). This may explain why the theoretically specific discourse of critical pedagogy is not more pervasive in the broader social justice literature than we might assume it would be.

Cultural studies parallels multiculturalism and critical pedagogy in that it is one of the more contemporary theoretically specific discourses that some social justice oriented educators claim as their ideological home. It is difficult to concisely define cultural studies, though like critical pedagogy, its practitioners share a commitment to academic work that is explicitly political, interdisciplinary, interventionist and transformative. Describing cultural studies in education, Hytten (2006) writes that “among its goals are to understand the relationship between power and knowledge, to look at how power gets symbolically and representationally reproduced, to challenge disempowering social practices, and to provide resources for resistance and social transformation” (p. 234). Cultural studies advocates want to not only better understand how certain cultural practices get valued above others, and concurrently how power and privilege are inequitably distributed, but also to transform such inequitable relationships in the interest of social justice. In fact, Handel Wright (2003) claims that cultural studies is itself a “form of social justice praxis...an intervention in institutional, sociopolitical and cultural arrangements, events and directions” (p. 806). Similar to critical pedagogy, work in cultural studies of education is also often critiqued for being too theoretically dense and abstract, and while a social justice mission is at the heart of this movement, work in cultural studies is still somewhat marginal in the larger body of social justice literature in education.

There are a number of other more theoretically specific movements for social justice that provide inspiration and resources for educators who connect their personal and pedagogical commitments to the goal of transforming oppressive social systems and structures. For example, feminist scholars work specifically to dismantle discriminatory and patriarchal gender practices while ethnic studies scholars work to create spaces for empowerment for historically marginalized groups. One of the strengths of the writings in this genre of social justice work is that these theoretical movements are often developed in deep and sophisticated ways, providing language and resources for seeing and disrupting common sense ideologies and opening up new ways of understanding interlocking systems of oppression. Yet at the same time, there is often little engagement across the various movements, as writers within more specifically developed and articulated theoretical traditions

seem to be writing for, working with, and speaking largely only to each other. As we read though some of the writings in this strand of social justice literature, we are reminded of the need for creating more strategic alliances and for the sharing of resources rather than the reinvention, and isolated reiteration, of them in a number of different spheres.

Democratically Grounded

A fifth strand in the literature grounds justice in visions of what it means to be an educated person in a democracy. Educators coming to social justice from this perspective situate their thinking about justice in connection to considering the fundamental purposes of education in a democratic society. They claim that among its primary purposes, education should help to promote the knowledge and skills needed for thoughtful citizenship. Describing “public education’s most fundamental purpose,” Wood (1992) writes that it is “the development in our children of the habits of heart and mind that make democratic life possible” (p. xvi). These habits include a sense of responsibility toward others and to creating a world in which all people can achieve their potential. Beane and Apple (2007) argue that social justice is inherently a part of a democratic way of life. They maintain that democratic citizens value an open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity; have faith in their capacity to work collectively to create a better world; use critical reflection to analyze social problems and policies; are always concerned with the welfare of others and work to promote the common good; fight for the rights and dignity of minorities; and create institutions and value systems that support a democratic way of life (p. 7). Similarly, Parker (2003) maintains that democratic citizens actively promote justice; they are people who are “principled and compassionate, who refrain from harming or exploiting others, and who believe it is their duty both to protect just institutions and to prevent injustice” (p. 54).

Educators who come to social justice through a vision of democracy maintain a very active, participatory and critical notion of citizenship. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) make a useful distinction between three kinds of citizenship: personally responsible, participatory and justice-oriented. Not surprisingly, writers situating social justice in relation to democracy call for the development of justice-oriented citizens, even as elements of the other visions of citizenship may be embedded in a larger vision of social, political, and economic justice. To understand what they mean by a citizen who centralizes justice in their thinking and action in the world, it is useful to briefly explore the other visions of citizenship too. Personally responsible citizens have good moral character and assume a sense of responsibility to others in their community. They obey laws, donate time and money when asked, and treat others with respect. Participatory citizens take this sense of responsibility one step further in that they are active in the community and local government and engage in collective efforts at social change. Justice oriented citizens also value responsibility and participation, yet at the same time they see the importance of concurrent structural and social critique and “argue that effective democratic citizens

Understanding Education for Social Justice

need opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political forces” (p. 242). Justice oriented citizens look for the root causes of social problems and aim to disrupt privileging systems, rather than celebrating charity and volunteerism as the primary means to social change. We can see the differences among these approaches well in the example Westheimer and Kahne (2004) offer of responding to the problem of hunger: “if participatory citizens are organizing the food drive and personally responsible citizens are donating food, justice-oriented citizens are asking why people are hungry and acting on what they discover” (p. 242).

Westheimer and Kahne’s vision of developing justice oriented citizens parallels that of other writers in this genre of social justice literature. For example, Ayers, Hunt, and Quinn (1998) argue that teaching for social justice is inseparable from teaching that supports the development of a thriving democracy. Maxine Greene makes this connection well in the introduction to their edited collection, *Teaching for Social Justice: A Democracy and Education Reader* (1998). She claims that in a democratic society, justice is “the primary value of political life,” especially as it “is incarnated in human action in spaces where people live together” (p. xx-viii). Teaching that inspires justice oriented citizenship is “teaching to the end of arousing a consciousness of membership, active and participant membership in a society of unfulfilled promises—teaching for...heightened social consciousness, a wide-awakeness that might make injustice unendurable” (p. xxx). Other chapters in this collection expand on a democratic grounding for social justice. For example, Bill Bigelow (1998) describes a creative and compelling lesson on the impact of global capitalism that he uses with his high school students to help show why we “need to care about and to act in solidarity with workers around the world in their struggles for better lives” (p. 29). Westheimer and Kahne (1998) offer a portrait of a school built around the need for participatory, justice oriented democracy; “a school unabashed in its commitment to fostering the attitudes, skills and knowledge required to engage and act on important social issues” (p. 2).

The biggest strength of this strand of social justice writing is the holistic vision of justice as a fundamental component of democratic citizenship. Starting with a vision of democracy that balances individual rights and responsibilities and that is premised upon upholding the common good helps us to see why social justice matters, for without this vision of justice, democratic life is impossible. Yet at the same time, the vision of democracy upheld in this strand of literature is an idealistic one, not what is currently engaged in under the banner of democracy in this country. The gulf between the rhetorical claims about democracy and reality are wide. Skeptics of a democratic vision of social justice argue that democracy is often an exclusionary concept, for example, in the arbitrary denial of citizenship rights to certain groups of people living in this country. Moreover, they see actions taken in the name of democracy as often imperialistic, colonizing, self-righteous and arrogant. For example, Richardson and Villenas (2000) write that as many “scholars are invested in the theoretical idealism of democracy, they appear amnesiac toward the continued lived realities of democratically induced oppression” (p. 260). It

does seem clear, however, that writers in this strand of social justice literature are working toward a more idealized vision of democracy as a way of life that aims to disrupt oppression and to empower individuals and communities to create socially just institutions, policies, systems and structures.

Rethinking Social Justice

As there is so much education literature directly and indirectly related to social justice, it is useful to have some kind of organizing framework to make sense of the various kinds of visions people hold when they claim to ground their efforts in social justice. Our five genres of literature are simply one idiosyncratic, non-comprehensive, take on this vast body of work. We are well aware that there are also many social justice writings that cut across all these categories. For instance, we see how books like Johnson's (2006) *Privilege, Power and Difference*, Weber's (2001) *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, and Delpit's (1995) *Other People's Children* contain elements of all these genres of writing. They include narratives, definitions, practical strategies, and connections to various other critical and democratic educational theories, all in the service of disrupting common sense ways of thinking about diversity and oppression and offering tools for more socially just action. Yet heuristically, we found our five strands nonetheless useful in sorting through the literature on what it means to claim a social justice orientation in education and in imagining how we might enhance each of these areas through strategic, cross-disciplinary coalitional work.

Despite the significant volume of social justice work in education, one of the pieces that seems to be missing is a genuine dialogue across various positions that helps us to build on each of their strengths as well as to better acknowledge challenges and reflect on the complexities of education for social justice. We don't see the goal of this dialogue as coming to some sort of consensus about what social justice means, rather, we see it as an important part of engaging in the difficult work of making connections, building bridges, and developing alliances that may help us to more effectively center a social justice agenda in schools and society—especially at a time when the commitment to social justice in education seems to be wavering. Speaking in particular about creating more empowering teaching practices, hooks (1994) writes “that it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention” (p. 129). Ultimately, we hope that characterizing diverse strands in the social justice literature can help us to better build bridges across various positions and create openings for more sustained dialogue among educators who share similar, and often overlapping, goals. Better understanding what we mean when we call for social justice in education can hopefully contribute to opening up new angles for seeing and new possibilities for engaging each other across differing passions, commitments and agendas.

Understanding Education for Social Justice

References

- Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W. J., Castañeda, R., Hackman, H., Peters, M. L., & Zúñiga, X. (Eds.). (2000). *Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, anti-semitism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism*. New York: Routledge.
- Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook*. New York: Routledge.
- Anzaldúa, G., & Keating, A. (Eds.). (2002). *This bridge we call home*. New York: Routledge.
- Apple, M. W. (2001). *Educating the "right" way: Markets, standards, god, and inequality*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Apple, M. W. (1996). *Cultural politics & education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ayers, W., Hunt, J. A., & Quinn, T. (Eds.). (1998). *Teaching for social justice: A democracy and education reader*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Banks, J. (1989). Multicultural education: Characteristics and goals. In J. Banks & C. Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Banks, J. A. (1993). Multicultural education: Historical development, dimensions, and practice. *Review of Research in Education*, 19, 3-49.
- Beane, J. A., & Apple, M. W. (2007). The case for democratic schools. In M. W. Apple, & J. A. Beane (Eds.), *Democratic schools: Lessons in powerful education*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Bell, L. A. (1997). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A sourcebook* (pp. 3-15). New York: Routledge.
- Bettez, S. C. (2008). Social justice activist teaching in the university classroom. In J. Deim & R. J. Helfenbein (Eds.), *Unsettling beliefs: Teaching theory to teachers* (pp. 279-296). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Bigelow, B. (1998). The human lives behind the labels: The global sweatshop, Nike, and the race to the bottom. In W. Ayers, J. A. Hunt, & T. Quinn (Eds.), *Teaching for social justice: A democracy and education reader* (pp. 21-38). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Carger, C. L. (1996). *Of borders and dreams: A Mexican-American experience of urban education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Carlisle, L. R., Jackson, B. W., & George, A. (2006). Principles of social justice education: The social justice education in schools project. *Equity & Excellence in Education* 39, 55-64.
- Carlson, D., & Dimitriadis, G. (2003). Introduction. In G. Dimitriadis & D. Carlson (Eds.), *Promises to keep: Cultural studies, democratic education, and public life* (pp. 1-35). New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Counts, G. S. (1932). *Dare the school build a new social order*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., French, J., & Garcia-Lopez, S. P. (Eds.). (2002). *Learning to teach for social justice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflicts in the classroom*. New York: The New Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed, 30th anniversary edition*. New York: Continuum.
- Gaskins, P. F. (1999). *What are you?: Voices of mixed-race young people*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.

- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Grant, C. A., & Gillette, M. (2006). A candid talk to teacher educators about effectively preparing teachers who can teach everyone's children. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 292-299.
- Greene, M. (1998). Introduction—Teaching for social justice. In W. Ayers, J. A. Hunt, & T. Quinn (Eds.), *Teaching for social justice: A democracy and education reader* (pp. xxvii-xlvi). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hackman, H. (2005). Five essential components for social justice education. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 38, 103-109.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. New York: Routledge.
- Hytten, K. (2006). Education for social justice: Provocations and challenges. *Educational Theory*, 56(2), 221-236.
- Johnson, A. (2006). *Privilege, power, and difference, 2nd edition*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kozol, J. (1967). *Death at an early age*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York: Crown.
- Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York: Crown.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Landsman, J. (2001). *A White teacher talks about race*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press.
- Lynch, K., & Baker, J. (2005). Equality in education: An equality of condition perspective. *Theory and Research in Education*, 3(2), 131-164.
- Marshall, C., & Gerstl-Pepin, C. (2005). *Reframing educational politics for social justice*. Boston: Pearson.
- Marshall, C., & Oliva, M. (2006). *Leadership for social justice: Making revolutions in education*. Boston: Pearson.
- McDonald, M. A. (2005). The integration of social justice in teacher education: Dimensions of prospective teachers' opportunities to learn. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(5), 418-435.
- McLaren, P. (2003). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education, 4th edition*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Michelli, N. M., & Keiser, D. L. (2005). *Teacher education for democracy and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Michie, G. (2005). *See you when we get there: Teaching for change in urban schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Montalto, N. V. (1982). *A history of the Intercultural Educational Movement*. New York: Garland.
- Moule, J. (2005). Implementing a social justice perspective in teacher education: Invisible burden for faculty of color. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 32(4), 23-42.
- Murphy, J. (1999). *The quest for a center: Notes on the state of the profession of educational leadership*. Columbia, MO: University Council for Educational Administration. Cited in G. C. Furman & D. A. Gruenewald. (2004). Expanding the landscape of social justice: A critical ecological analysis. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 47-76.
- Murrell, P. Jr. (2006). Toward social justice in urban education: A model of collaborative

Understanding Education for Social Justice

- cultural inquiry in urban schools. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 39, 81-90.
- Novak, M. (2000). Defining social justice. *First Things*, 108, 11-13.
- Nozick, R. (1976). *Anarchy, state and utopia*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Parker, W. (2003). *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Rawls, J. (1972). *A theory of justice*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Richardson, T. (2000). "Other" encounters: Dances with whiteness in multicultural education. *Educational Theory*, 50(2), 255-273.
- Rizvi, F. (1998). Some thoughts on contemporary theories of social justice. In B. Atweh, S. Kemmis, & P. Weeks (Eds.), *Action research in practice: Partnerships for social justice in education* (pp. 47-56). London, UK: Routledge.
- Rothenberg, P. S. (Ed.). (2001). *Race, class, and gender in the United States: An integrated study* (5th ed.). New York: Worth Publishers.
- Sleeter, C. E. (1996). *Multicultural education as social activism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Taba, H., Brady, E., & Robinson, J. (1952). *Intergroup education in public schools*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Tea, M. (Ed.). (2003). *Without a net: The female experience of growing up working class*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Thompson, B., & Tyagi, S. (Eds.). (1996). *Names we call home: Autobiography on racial identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Wasley, P. (2006, June 6). Accreditor of education school drops controversial 'social justice' language. *The chronicle of higher education*. Retrieved July 6, 2006, from <http://chronicle.com/daily/2006/06/2006060602n.htm>
- Weber, L. (2001). *Understanding race, class, gender, and sexuality: A conceptual framework*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (1998). Education for action: Preparing youth for participatory democracy. In W. Ayers, J. A. Hunt, & T. Quinn (Eds.), *Teaching for social justice: A democracy and education reader* (pp. 1-20). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237-269.
- Wink, J. (2005). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Wood, G. H. (1992). *Schools that work: America's most innovative public education programs*. New York: Plume.
- Wright, H. K. (2003). Cultural studies as praxis: (Making) An autobiographical case. *Cultural Studies*, 17(6), 805-822.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zeichner, K. M. (2003). The adequacies and inadequacies of three current strategies to recruit, prepare, and retain the best teachers for all students. *Teachers College Record*, 105(3), 490-519.
- Zollers, N. J., Albert, L. R., & Cochran-Smith, M. (2000). In pursuit of social justice: Collaborative research and practice in teacher education. *Action in Teacher Education*, 22(2), 1-14.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.