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# Five Essential Components for Social Justice Education

Heather W. Hackman

The question of how to teach effectively from a clear social justice perspective that empowers, encourages students to think critically, and models social change has been a consistent challenge for progressive educators. This article intends to shed light on this issue by demonstrating how educators can utilize a social justice pedagogical lens to treat their content in ways that meet their commitment to empowering education. Specifically, this article clarifies what social justice education is by introducing readers to five key components useful in teaching from a social justice perspective: tools for content mastery, tools for critical thinking, tools for action and social change, tools for personal reflection, and tools for awareness of multicultural group dynamics. While no pedagogical approach is a panacea, this approach offers readers five specific areas to focus on in their teaching and their efforts at working toward social justice in their classrooms.

**T**his is a critical time in our world, in our nation, and certainly in public education. The tense political discourse and hugely contrasting ideas about the future of U.S. education leaves many families, teachers, communities, and administrators at a loss for how to best serve the students in their schools and our society as a whole. In a climate characterized by well-intentioned but poorly funded policies like No Child Left Behind (NCLB), educators need to take a stronger and more vocal stance against the furtherance of policies and approaches that serve some at the expense of many. Instead of trying to work with policies such as NCLB, educators need to demand educational environments conducive to engaged, critical, and empowered thinking and action. Equity and social justice need to move beyond being merely buzzwords and instead become part of the lived practice in the classroom.

Over the last decade, a number of authors have included the concept of social justice in their work and called for a commitment to social justice education (SJE). And yet, a review of the literature reveals a range of definitions of social justice education and its manifestation in the classroom. Those unfamiliar with it might see social justice education as being about treating all students equally, while others might think it involves the dismantling and reconstructing of education from its very core. While having a broad definitional range

creates multiple points of entry in teaching for social justice, it ultimately does the field a disservice by diluting the essence of social justice education and weakening the call for teachers, schools, and communities to be true vanguards for change. I address this issue by presenting what I perceive to be most fundamental to social justice education via a definition of it and then a presentation of five components I view as necessary for its effective implementation. These five components (content mastery, critical thinking, action skills, self-reflection, and an awareness of multicultural group dynamics) represent neither an exhaustive nor an exclusive understanding of social justice education. They do, however, help clarify what constitutes a social justice educational approach, and provide for socially and politically conscious K-12 teachers a clearer sense of how to focus their classroom content and process.

## DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

Working in chorus with the goals of other educational theory bases, 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. Bell (1997) defines social justice as being a goal and a process. “The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs,” (Bell, 1997, p. 3) while, “the process for attaining the goal of social justice . . . should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working

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collaboratively to create change” (p. 4). I have distilled Bell’s goals of social justice education to include student empowerment, the equitable distribution of resources and social responsibility, and her processes to include democracy, a student-centered focus, dialogue, and an analysis of power. Social justice education does not merely examine difference or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality, and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change. Clearly, this definition goes well beyond the celebration of diversity, the use of dialogue groups in the classroom, or even the existence of democratic processes regarding class goals and procedures. To be most effective, social justice education requires an examination of systems of power and oppression combined with a prolonged emphasis on social change and student agency in and outside of the classroom.

### FIVE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

Although it is important to clarify the meaning of social justice education, it also is vital to identify a specific course of classroom implementation. My desire for a more equitable approach to teaching encouraged me to examine the literature for a more specific explanation of a social justice educational approach. I found that a social justice approach can be characterized by five essential

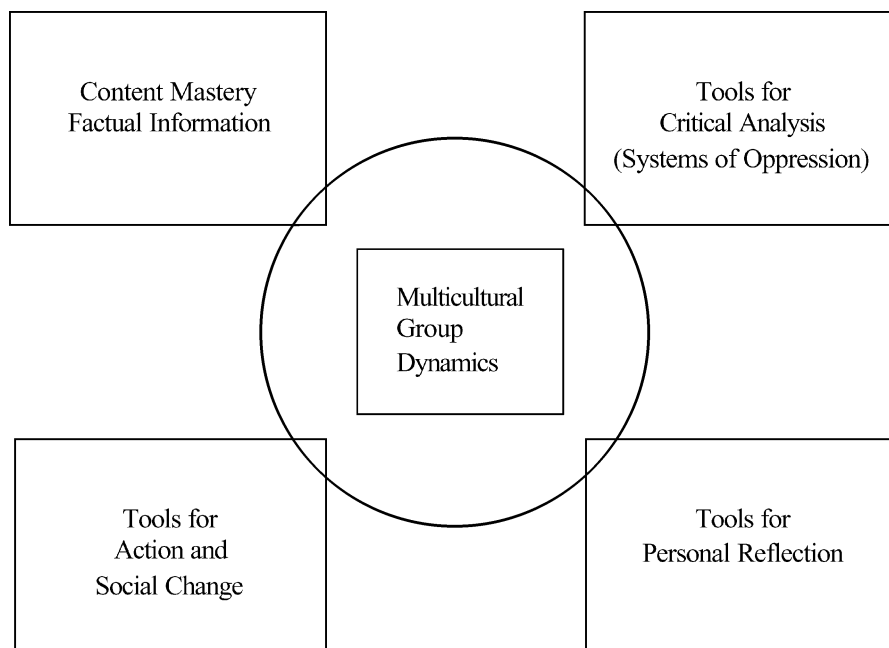
components:

- Content mastery
- Tools for critical analysis
- Tools for social change
- Tools for personal reflection
- An awareness of multicultural group dynamics

The diagram in Figure 1 reveals that solid work in any of these five areas will lead to more critical educational environments that benefit students and communities. However, it is the combination and interaction of all five components that creates an effective environment for social justice education. To illustrate, I briefly explain each component and then discuss how their interactions contribute to a social justice educational environment.

#### Tool 1: Content Mastery

Content mastery is a vital aspect of social justice education and consists of three principle spheres: factual information, historical contextualization, and a macro-to-micro content analysis. Content mastery is the first component of effective social justice education because information acquisition is an essential basis for learning. Without complex sources of information, students cannot possibly participate in positive, proactive social change. Importantly, factual information must not merely reproduce dominant, hegemonic ideologies but instead represent a range of ideas and information that go beyond those usually presented in mainstream media



**Figure 1**  
Five essential components for social justice education.

or educational materials. More specifically, the “facts” necessary for effective social justice education must represent broad and deep levels of information so that students can not only critically examine content but also effectively dialogue about it with others. Remembering that social justice education asks students to engage in social responsibility, educators must provide students with enough critical information to do so effectively; otherwise, students are set up for failure and frustration.

Ahistorical information, however, leaves students with a limited understanding of the political, social, and economic forces and patterns that create and sustain the oppressive social dynamics students are contesting and transforming. Thus, a thorough understanding of the historical context of all classroom content is vital for students to construct an analytical lens. Again, this content must be examined with a critical perspective because history is written by the members of dominant groups and the need for a broad representation of history is essential. Loewen (1996) illustrates the empowering effect that critical views of history can have on students through his analysis of historical bias in public school history books.

And finally, content mastery involves student understanding on both the micro and the macro levels. First, as countless authors in both multicultural and social justice education indicate, students need information that is connected to their lives and that helps them to understand the micro-level implications of macro issues (Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Nieto, 2000). From this, students can engage in social action and formulate ideas for concrete ways to incorporate classroom content into their lives, communities, and society as a whole. Second, students need to develop a solid understanding of how classroom content connects with larger issues in society. In a socially just classroom, these two levels are constantly interacting, thus helping students to truly understand the phrase, “think globally, act locally.” Ultimately, both students and teachers need to be able to answer the question, “Why is this information important on both a micro and macro scale?” Understanding both micro and macro implications for content mastery draws from student experience, invites them into the knowledge construction process, and leads to a more student-centered classroom.

To better understand these three aspects of content mastery, consider the issue of global warming. Mainstream media and information sources often portray this issue as something that seems to “just be happening” without any specific reference to its sources, implications, or suggestions of proactive measures that individuals and governments can take to stop it. This presentation leaves students minimally exposed to how to accurately address the issue, or leaves unquestioned the consumption and production patterns of the United States and other industrial nations. Examining this issue from a social justice perspective with respect to con-

tent mastery, however, would include an explanation of the science and health impact of global warming, underscored by statistical data and international research. Students could examine this information through a critical lens and question the progression of global warming and deforestation throughout the last two centuries with a special emphasis on the industrialization period. What global and national historical, political, and economic forces have contributed to and maintained (sped up or slowed down) the progression of global warming on this planet? And finally, students would examine the implications of this issue globally, as well as locally, addressing macro scale questions, such as: “Which countries produce the most waste? Where is this waste distributed globally? How are people in other countries affected by global warming? What policies have been effective in curbing the production of greenhouse gases? Why have some countries continually undermined efforts at curbing global warming? Which countries are they? How do multinational corporations figure into this issue? What is environmental racism?” On a micro level, students would address questions such as: “What are my own consumption patterns? What does this classroom, school, and community do with our waste? How do we contribute to the problem or the solution? What is the impact for me, right now in my life, regarding global warming? What will be the impact on me in 20, 30 and 50 years?”

### **Tool 2: Critical Thinking and the Analysis of Oppression**

For four key reasons, content alone is insufficient to create democratic, empowering classroom settings, or to adequately prepare students to become active agents of change and social justice in their lives and communities. First, the mere possession of information does not necessarily translate into wisdom or deep knowledge. This is evident, for example, in that individuals in the U.S. have “known” about the historical and current manifestations of racism, and yet that knowledge has not been enough to motivate change on the deepest of levels. Closer examination reveals that content without historical context, especially when combined with lack of analysis, results in the inability to challenge racism in any significant way. Second, the possession of information alone does not necessarily provide students with a pathway for action. In my classes, for example, I have witnessed students feeling overwhelmed by the information presented and, as a result, feeling “stuck” and unsure of how to act to change unjust social patterns. Third, presentation of information as *truth* devoid of critique runs the risk of creating a dogmatic and prescriptive classroom environment. In a social justice classroom, *all* content is subject to debate and critique. And finally, information presented outside a context of power and

oppression runs the risk of recreating the marginalization experienced by members of oppressed groups, such as students of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer students, women, or poor/working-class folks.

To avoid these pitfalls and the paralysis, hopelessness, cynicism, and powerlessness they often invoke, educators must help students to use critical analysis and the careful consideration of issues of oppression to provide both deep knowledge and a direction for the application of that knowledge in students' lives. Paulo Freire's (1970) praxis loop is a wonderful example of how information needs to be combined with tools for critical thinking to bring the power of that information to fruition. In particular, helping students use information to critique systems of power and inequality in society, to help them ask who benefits from said systems, and to encourage them to consider what aspects of our social structures keep those inequalities alive are all important and necessary ways for students to become more engaged in social justice education.

The term critical thinking has become so overused in education that it has lost some of its meaning. Thinking about an issue is not equivalent to *critical* thinking, which requires: (1) focusing on information from multiple, non-dominant perspectives, and seeing those as independently valid and not as an add-on to the dominant, hegemonic one; (2) de-centering students' analytical frame and opening their minds to a broader range of experiences; (3) analyzing the effects of power and oppression; and (4) inquiring into what alternatives exist with respect to the current, dominant view of reality of this issue. The first two points are particularly important in that if I critically analyze other cultural perspectives while never leaving the safety and comfort of my own, I do nothing more than reify "the other" or "exotic other" status of those groups and perpetuate the dehumanization of those groups. Therefore, critical thinking is the process by which we consider perspective, positionality, power, and possibilities with respect to content.

### **Tool 3: Action and Social Change**

The third component, tools for action and social change, is critical to help move students from cynicism and despair to hope and possibility. Upon learning about issues of oppression and privilege, dominant group members may feel mired in the reality of their privilege, and subordinate group members may re-experience the frustration of oppression. Teaching about issues of oppression without proffering social action tools for students ultimately creates a classroom atmosphere that lacks hope and creative energy. If the goal of SJE is to support critical thinking, then we must create classroom spaces that provide the opportunity to do so. It is also necessary to intentionally teach these tools because most

students in our public and private educational environments are taught to feel disempowered ("I can't change anything; I am just one person"), complacent ("I don't have time to change anything"), or hopeless ("Nothing will ever change anyway").

One of the most effortless forms of cultural imperialism is to convince those living within systems of inequality that there is nothing they can or should do about it (Young, 2000). Those who dare to critique and challenge the status quo are labeled a threat to the fabric of democracy and freedom in the United States. Our current sociopolitical climate is an example of a society where dissent from the dominant ideology is seen as "un-American" and unpatriotic. Educators need to disrupt the notion that silence is patriotic and teach students that their rights as citizens in this society carry responsibilities—of participation, voice, and protest—so that this can actually become a society of, by, and for *all* of its citizens. Students need to learn that social action is fundamental to the everyday workings of their lives.

Specific classroom and teaching tools for action and social change vary, of course, according to the content and the political perspective of those involved. For some, Saul Alinsky's (1971) radical approach to taking power via grassroots protests and street actions and its redistribution to the masses via economic and political access is fitting. To others, Freire's (1973) "problem posing" process for the achievement of awareness and education as the practice of freedom is the more useful approach. And still for others, Zúñiga's and Sevig's (2000) focus on social change through intergroup dialogue or Christenson's (1998) route to social change through writing and literacy development are important approaches. Additionally, some approaches and tools for social change will be grounded within "the system" (Oakes & Lipton, 1999), while others will embody Lorde's (1984) notion that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Whatever the approach, there is a long history of social action and social change in this country for both dominant and subordinate groups, and teachers who expose students to this history and the broad assortment of tools for social change will prepare them well for social justice work.

### **Tool 4: Personal Reflection**

Using these first three components is typically the extent to which teachers engage in social justice education (Hackman, 2000). A fourth component, personal reflection, reminds teachers to reflect critically on themselves and the personal qualities that inform their practice. In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom and Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks (1994; see also hooks, 2003) articulates three central ways in which the ability to be critically self-reflective lends

itself to an effective social justice teaching environment. The first is the issue of power and dominant group privilege as it connects to the range of one's social identities. The popular essay by Peggy McIntosh (1988) on white privilege illustrates self-reflection regarding power and privilege. McIntosh reveals that she had never thought about her privilege before because it had previously been invisible to her, and that she had never imagined the impact of her privilege on members of the target group. Her first point can be further broken down into three key aspects relative to self-reflection and one's privilege as a member of the dominant group: (1) Dominants are *actively* taught not to see their privilege; (2) Dominants are taught to see their life and its privileges as the "norm" for society and humanity; and (3) Dominants have done nothing to earn this privilege. Unless these three areas are critically reflected upon, the invisibility of privilege persists and continues to support larger, oppressive structures in society and in one's teaching. Ongoing self-reflection allows dominant group members to begin to extricate themselves from the trappings of this invisible privilege and work to be more effective agents of change in their classrooms and communities. Teachers can undertake self-reflection for themselves through a continual critique of their practice, ongoing dialogue with colleagues, and a persistent exposure to new content areas. Utilizing pedagogical tools, such as reflective writing exercises and assignments that connect content to student lives, teachers can extend the importance of self-reflection in their classrooms and build the habit of critical self-reflection into the educational repertoire of students.

McIntosh's (1988) self-reflection exposes that she had never considered herself to be part of the problem of racism because she was a nice person. Lack of self-reflection allows dominant group members to live with the delusion that simply being nice means they have no connection to racism, sexism, or other forms of social inequality in our society, and therefore have no responsibility to work toward the solution. Lack of self-reflection may prevent P-12 teachers from creating the kind of empowering and affirming classroom spaces that effectively support academic success for all students. Similarly, lack of reflection may evoke a response to the realities of racism such as this one, which I hear frequently in my own classes, "That's horrible! I had no idea things were this bad. People of color should really do something about this!" Only when students also understand their white privilege do they realize that, as white students, it is not enough to be a nice person and that they have at least an equal, if not *more important*, part in challenging and changing racism in the U.S. Ultimately, lack of self-reflection locks all of us, no matter what our social identities, into places of passivity and powerlessness, while members of our surrounding communities and society lack the necessary resources for a healthy, success-

ful life. Being a "nice person" or asserting that "I treat all students the same," or that "I don't see color in my classroom," indicates the lack of critical interrogation of one's positionality.

Ongoing self-reflection also reminds educators that there is always more to consider, and helps to keep their minds open to other possibilities. Teachers can reflect on such questions as: Where did I get this information? Why do I think this? Do I know this for sure or is it merely an old idea mistaken for fact? This form of self-interrogation also helps educators to be more cognizant of their power in the classroom (Hackman, 2000, Kreisberg, 1992), and opens the door for the democratic and dialogical classroom processes that social justice education requires.

The final issue regarding the importance of self-reflection is that it provides the educator and students sites to take action. Education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994) always begins with the individual's willingness to grow and change. As such, to make a consistent commitment to self-reflection and personal interrogation gives educators and students alike a place to enact social change and growth. Having the self as a site for change is a useful way to prevent the feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness that students sometimes encounter when discussing macro-level social issues. In addition, self-reflection can serve as a constant motivator, as it knocks teachers and students out of complacency and steers them in the direction of the solution instead of the problem. This seems particularly true for dominant group members in their work to resist the seduction of privilege and to maintain the commitment to social justice work on all fronts. Especially in regards to white privilege, ongoing self-reflection helps Whites continually work to challenge racism and be vigilant about the deconstruction of white privilege in society.

Subordinate group members also can utilize self-reflection by examining how internalized oppression has impacted their lives and communities, and how their dominant and subordinate identities interact. For example, there was a period in my own development as a woman where I was rightfully angry at the system of sexism in our society, and in the process of challenging it on both micro and macro scales, I was unfortunately not as aware of how internalized sexism affected my growth and development or my efficacy as a change agent. In addition, this lack of self-awareness kept me so entrenched in my subordinate experience that I was unable to make the connection to my dominant identities or see how I was reproducing oppressive dynamics similar to the ones I was fighting, albeit in terms of race and disability oppression. It was almost as if I were saying that because I was experiencing the pain of sexism, I did not need to look at my own racism and ableism. To be clear, I am not equating my lack of awareness of my privilege to internalized sexism. But, as I began to reflect critically on my own behavior, I could no longer tolerate the fact

that I was not challenging my own racism and ableism while expecting men to do so regarding sexism. Teachers and students alike can avoid this pitfall by engaging in consistent self-reflection as it applies both to their subordinate and dominant identities. An analysis of power is one way for teachers and students to begin this aspect of self-reflection and to move closer toward the creation of a socially just classroom.

### **Tool 5: Awareness of Multicultural Group Dynamics**

The fifth element for effective teaching for social justice involves understanding group dynamics of the classroom and the socially constructed identities of the teacher and students. An awareness of these dynamics determines how social justice educators will approach the previous four dynamics, and thus impacts the efficacy of their implementation. For example, in an all-white classroom situated in an all-white community, the content presented regarding racism and white privilege will be different than it would be in a classroom with diverse racial identities, which is different, again, from a classroom with all students of color. The form and type of content that the teacher presents, the attention to how these different class compositions affect dialogue and facilitation, and the amount of time spent on content versus process will differ for these three classrooms. If a teacher teaches the same way in all three environments, he or she will not adequately address the needs of the students, and will miss an important opportunity for social justice education. Creating a student-centered learning environment is lauded as an essential element of good teaching by some of the best thinkers in the fields of multicultural education and social justice education (Ayers, 1998; Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Shor, 1992), and yet if an educator does not consider the group dynamics as they pertain to social identities and multicultural perspectives, they miss the true potential of student-centered teaching and social justice education.

The make-up of the class is not a reason to shy away from addressing critical issues in the classroom. For example, some educators feel that they cannot adequately discuss race and racism unless students of color are present, while others may feel that the lack of student diversity regarding race indicates that there is no need for this discussion (Elder & Irons, 1998). Both perspectives are incorrect, and critical and ongoing discussions regarding diversity and social justice issues affect all of our lives and therefore should be an integral part of the classroom regardless of its make-up. Attention to student identities or multicultural group dynamics should not be used as an excuse for avoiding such conversations, but instead should be a reminder that who is in the room has an effect on content and process. Authors, such as

Tatum (1997), Zúñiga and Sevig (2000), Root (2000), and Ford (2000), provide very useful and engaging frameworks for understanding the ways that social identities impact dialogue in the classroom and offer suggestions for effective cross-cultural communication. Understanding these dynamics, rather than avoiding the discussion altogether, leads to a more effective and engaging social justice classroom.

While student-centered pedagogy is a key aspect of a social justice classroom, it should not be used as a means for members of traditionally marginalized groups to be placed in the position of educating the dominant group members in the classroom. It is each class member's responsibility to be an agent of his or her own education and not to reproduce disempowering societal dynamics within the classroom. Thus, effective utilization of multicultural group dynamics toward a social justice end can happen only if the class members, and in particular the educator, are aware of these issues as well. Classroom activities that create a safe space for students to dialogue about issues of diversity, classroom expectations that underscore the value of diverse life experiences, and the infusion of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000) into the classroom all help teachers and students make effective use of the multicultural group dynamics.

### **CONCLUSION**

Utilizing any one of these components can benefit a classroom. Nieto (1998) discusses a continuum of multicultural education that has evolved over the last 35 years, stating that while regrettable, the lack of clarity about what multicultural education really is from the onset has allowed some educators to claim they are teaching from a multicultural perspective when they are really coming from a very limited, uncritical, tolerance-based perspective. In order for the field of social justice education to avoid this development, social justice educators must continue to work toward a clearer sense of what a social justice educational approach actually entails. To date, the work of Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997), Ayers, Hunt, and Quinn (1998), and many of the other authors referenced in this article have made significant contributions toward that end. To suggest that these five components are essential is not an attempt to limit the conversation, but to frame a starting point and encourage educators who embrace a social justice approach to continue to move the field forward and ultimately create classroom spaces that are empowering and committed to social change.

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