

Perspectives

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Professional Development

Toward a More Nuanced and Reflective Social Justice Discourse

by Deirdre M. Kelly

There are multiple and competing frameworks for thinking about what constitutes both “social justice” as well as “teaching.” My own thinking about this – as someone who has co-created a teacher education program focused on this theme and who is involved in a long-term study in this area – has been highly influenced by the theoretical work of political philosophers Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser.

In broad terms, I conceptualize *teaching for social justice* as involving both (a) anti-oppression education and (b) teaching for democratic citizenship. This paper focuses on anti-oppression education. I explicate Young’s theoretical framework and adapt and extend it to education, showing how it might be used to help teachers think through what they mean when they imagine themselves as promoters of social justice and weigh choices about what and how to teach

According to Young (1990):

Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes, which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people’s ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen. (p. 38)

The core value that is threatened by oppression, self-development, is obviously central to the educational undertaking.

By using the term *oppression*, Young foregrounds an analysis of social structures and institutionalized social processes that

is “incommensurate with the language of liberal individualism that dominates political discourse in the United States” (p. 39). She stresses that “oppression is a condition of groups” (p. 40) and “designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power coerces them, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society” (p. 41):

...oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms – in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41)

Given the power of individualism in our society, it is a challenge to convey this meaning of oppression to pre-service teachers. Some are apt to react defensively. They do not see that they or those they know consciously and intentionally oppress people on the basis of race, class, gender, and so on. But, following Foucault, Young notes that power is understood more diffusely. People may be helping to reproduce oppression without consciously or intentionally doing so.

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Anti-oppressive education seeks to counter various forms of oppression. Often these forms of oppression are conceptualized as “the isms”: sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, classism, ageism, and so on. Rather than categorize forms of oppression by which group is suffering, however, Young (1990) instead classifies oppression by the different types of structural constraints placed on the self-development of members of particular social groups. She discerns five major “faces” of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. This approach to defining oppression is attractive for several reasons. It avoids divisive, and ultimately unproductive, debates about which form of oppression is primary or which group is the

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most oppressed. It encourages a focus on the interconnections between oppressed groups, where these exist, while allowing important differences to be seen as well. It also acknowledges that all people in a country like Canada belong to, and identify with, multiple groups, and that these group differences often cut against each other. Thus, depending on the specific context, people may find that a particular group identity places them in either a relation of privilege or oppression.

Young is not saying the “isms” are not important or do not need to be discussed or that all oppressions are the same. Indeed, a starting point for Young’s analysis is her recognition that various social movements (against racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and heterosexism, and class oppression) have successfully argued for seeing each “ism” as having its own dynamic and history.

To illustrate my conceptual argument, I will draw on semi-structured, hour-long interviews that a colleague and I conducted with 12 pre-service teachers after their extended practicum (see Kelly & Brandes, 2001). These pre-service teachers were members of the third cohort of the Humanities and Social Justice Teacher Education Program (HSJTEP) at the

University of British Columbia. They were all specializing in social studies, English, or both at the secondary level. The group of 12 reflected the demographic profile of the cohort as a whole in terms of sex (6 women, 6 men), age (most in their twenties and thirties), sexuality (11 heterosexual, 1 lesbian), and “race” (9 European Canadians, 2 Indo-Canadians, 1 Filipino-European Canadian). The participants taught in four public secondary schools; three were located in inner-city and working-class, multiethnic neighbourhoods, and the fourth was in an affluent neighbourhood.

We began each interview by asking the pre-service teachers to describe one or more incidents where they felt they had “taken a stand” during the practicum. We deliberately used this broad and somewhat vague phrase because, as much as possible, we wanted to determine which arenas for choice and action they envisioned for themselves as new teachers. The two most common ways that pre-service teachers described taking a stand (mentioned by over half of those interviewed) were calling attention to omissions in the socially dominant curriculum and challenging their students’ use of demeaning language, stereotypes, or behaviour.

In what follows, I analyze the pre-service teachers’ descriptions of teaching for social justice using four of the five faces of oppression outlined by Young. One form of oppression analyzed by Young, exploitation, was not in evidence during the pre-service teachers’ practicum and thus they did not discuss ways to counter exploitation.

Countering cultural imperialism

“Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm,” which has the result of rendering invisible the oppressed group’s perspective, while simultaneously stereotyping that group as the Other (Young, 1990, pp. 58-59). We saw pre-service teachers attempting to work against cultural imperialism when they: (a) drew their students’ attention to the social studies textbook’s framing of the period 1870-1900 as “The opening of the West,” which presents as universal and positive the European settlers’ perspective; (b) discussed with students the reasons for the omission of Aboriginal perspectives and reflected on how the omission feeds into existing stereotypes of Aboriginal people; and (c) made visible Aboriginal perspectives.

Seven of the twelve pre-service teachers we interviewed mentioned calling attention to omissions in the socially dominant curriculum when asked to describe an incident during their practicum when they took a stand. Mary explained, “The role of the teacher is always political, because what is emphasized and what isn’t [in the curriculum] is very deliberate.” When her class discussed the Canadian West, she saw it as her role “to fill a gap in historical knowledge and understanding” by adding lessons on the role of Chinese labourers in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway and on the Indian Act. She was not content merely to supplement the grade 10 social studies textbook in this way, but instead had her students brainstorm reasons for why these topics had been minimized. To do otherwise, said Mary, would mean “silencing a whole part of history that is racist but one that very much needs to be told.”

Countering systemic violence

Another major form of oppression is systemic violence. Systemic violence is “directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group” (Young, 1990, p. 62). “Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person” (Young, 1990, p. 61). Sadly, adults consciously and unconsciously pass along attitudes that help sustain this systemic violence, which then manifests itself among children. We saw pre-service teachers working against systemic violence, such as gay bashing, when they named, discussed, and refused to tolerate homophobic slurs.

Seven of the twelve teachers we interviewed described challenging their students’ use of demeaning language or behaviour (5 challenged homophobic comments, 3 racist comments, 3 sexist comments or actions, and 2 challenged the teasing of slow learners). Jasbir faced a difficult challenge when a friendship group of East Indian boys in her tenth grade social studies class were leaving class, and one boy, within earshot of Jasbir, called another boy in the group a “fag.” Jasbir used three strategies to challenge the slur: (a) she conveyed that the language was disrespectful and unacceptable, (b) she posed questions aimed at problematizing assumptions (e.g., that slurs made in jest are not damaging), and (c) she drew an analogy to a form of systemic violence that the boys abhorred (e.g., how would they feel,

as racialized minorities, Jasbir asked, if someone said, “I’m a racist, okay, I can’t help it”). Pre-service teachers spotlighted incidents of homophobia, racism, sexism, and ableism as teachable moments when they insisted on naming and discussing these incidents as more than simply individual examples of prejudice but instead as systemic violence. The boys in Jasbir’s class may not have gone out themselves and assaulted someone they perceived as gay, but with their homophobic remarks, they added to a climate where someone else might have been emboldened to do so.

Countering marginalization

Historically, certain social groups have been excluded from “useful participation in social life” (Young, 1990, p. 53), including school, and the effects of those exclusions are still felt, for example, among those who speak English as an additional language or who have disabilities. We saw pre-service teachers working against marginalization when they selected materials that explicitly focused on questions of social injustice in history and literature and spotlighted the perspectives of marginalized groups. We have seen more established in-service teachers working against marginalization when they lobby for resources and institutional and classroom policies that would include people labeled with developmental, psychiatric, and physical disabilities; the poor; and single mothers with small children.

Four of the twelve pre-service teachers we interviewed described taking a stand by selecting texts that brought their students’ attention to marginalized groups in society. Hardeep, for example, elected to use the novel *The Light in the Forest* in his grade 9 English class. “The novel” he explained, “has really blatant depictions of racism, and it’s geared really well for kids because it’s not veiled at all. The characters say what they want to say.” Hardeep’s purpose in the unit was to examine racist statements. “We would have a debate on whether statements from the book were opinion or fact and come to some conclusion. Then we started discussing how opinions get misconstrued as fact and can be

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used to perpetuate stereotypes and racism.” Hardeep’s discussion questions were: What causes the racist character to feel this way? Are the character’s reasons opinion or fact? How do opinions get misconstrued as fact? How do opinions affect behaviour? Where can we intervene?

Challenging powerlessness

Conventional schooling has been organized in ways that allow young people little say in what and how they learn or in shaping the rules that govern their behaviour (Kelly, 1993, 2003). Often, “they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them,” and, given their position at the bottom of a hierarchy, they are allowed to “exercise little creativity or judgment in their work . . . and do not command respect” (Young, 1990, pp. 56-57). Although categorizing young people as oppressed is perhaps controversial, their dependency on adults in our liberal society has provided “a sufficient warrant to suspend basic rights to privacy, respect, and individual choice” (Young, 1990, p. 54).

To take but three recent examples: Seniors in one California school district are required to sign up for postsecondary education in order to attend their high school graduation ceremony (Brown, 2002). Students deemed to be making inadequate academic progress or to have left school without graduating are not allowed to obtain or hold a driver’s permit or license in North Carolina – the so-called “Lose Control/Lose Your License” legislation. Similar legislation has been proposed in Ontario (Greenberg, 2005). Also in Ontario, the conservative government enacted and enforced legislation requiring teen mothers on social assistance to attend school or lose their welfare benefits. Older mothers on social assistance, by contrast, did not have to join the mandatory work-for-welfare program until their children were of school age (Southam Newspapers, 1999; Canadian Press, 1999).

A number of the twelve pre-service teachers we interviewed mentioned taking a stand by attempting to intervene in what they perceived as the adult-child, teacher-student power imbalance in place at many schools. Five of the twelve (Hardeep, Jasbir, Mary, Pierre, and Debbie) described a number of strategies they used to, as Mary put it, “deconstruct power dynamics between students and teachers” or the image of the “all-knowing teacher at the front of the classroom.” Pierre thought it ideal to express his opinion, supported by “historical knowledge,” in the middle of a debate rather than at the end, so that it would not be given undue weight by students. Given a teacher’s formal authority (e.g., to evaluate students’ work), Pierre stressed the importance of vigilance and reflection, because “you never know – what you’re promoting [either through action or inaction] may be oppressive.” Mary strove to “allow for open discussion before, during, and after I’ve said anything about the issue.... I want the students to hear me say, ‘I don’t know’ if I don’t know and that I’ll get back to them. I want them to see me affected by a hard issue that we’re covering.”

Like a number of his HSJTEP peers, Hardeep aimed to legitimize the marginalized perspectives of young people. While teaching a grade 10 English unit on *Animal Farm*, a student spontaneously drew a comparison between totalitarian dictatorship and life at school. Sensing the interest level of his students rising, Hardeep decided on the spot to encourage the rest of the class to consider the “parallels.” He set one ground rule: “You can’t mention individual teachers [by name], because I don’t want the teacher to be blasted in my classroom.” Students said things like, “Napoleon keeps the animals busy so that they don’t realize the state that they are in, and this is what teachers do. We [students] get busy work when you don’t know what to do with us.” “Assemblies are like spontaneous demonstrations in the book. We [students] are brought out there to make it look like, ‘Oh, it’s so fun.’” Hardeep both conceded points and challenged arguments when he thought them unfair. Sensing how “heated” the discussion had become, Hardeep also suggested the analogy was not exact: “We’re not here to exploit you as students.” Unlike Napoleon, continued Hardeep, teachers do not generally have “malicious intent.” By sanctioning an in-depth discussion of students’ subordination within school, Hardeep discovered how “animated” the students became.



To give her students more power over their learning, Debbie used literary texts in what O'Neill (1993) calls a "cultural criticism" orientation to teaching. When Debbie taught *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, she moved beyond the discussion of racism to a deconstruction of the text: "There are some glaring stereotypes about class and sex, too, that drive the plot forward and create suspense." While students learn to "challenge racism, they don't [learn to] challenge the other stereotypes at all." Debbie thus invited her students to construct conflicting and contradictory meanings of the text. This analysis provided the background for discussions of controversial social issues. According to Debbie, "The students like it when you point that out [how the text was constructed]; they love it. And there's not a right answer. They like that, too."

A number of the pre-service teachers spoke to the importance of generating a sense of agency in young people, and they used a variety of strategies to try to achieve this, including: (a) prompting students to think through alternative courses of action and their consequences (e.g., Hardeep had students brainstorm how they might intervene in incidents of racism at school); (b) advocating in wider public spheres (e.g., Pierre planned to have students prepare posters publicly displaying their research into historical and contemporary figures who had helped bring about social change); and (c) involving students in producing meaningful artifacts (e.g., Debbie asked students to create "their own media messages to counteract" commonly used stereotypes in the "mainstream media").

Yet another way that HSJTEP pre-service teachers attempted to cede some of their power and authority to their students was through alternative assessment practices. Debbie described taking a stand by disagreeing with her sponsor teacher over her assessment rubric for a unit she had been teaching. Debbie wanted to weight the content learned (use of dialogue, developing setting, developing character) much more heavily than "expression or use of language" for a particular assignment. Plus, because Debbie had already communicated one set of evaluation criteria and weightings to the students, she felt it was unfair to students to change it after the fact. "A lot of my students were new English learners, and they had excellent ideas. They were obviously paying attention in class and trying really hard, but they had problems with verb tenses, problems with verb agreement rules, all sorts of things, which compromised their expression."

In a variety of ways, then, the pre-service teachers challenged their students' sense of powerlessness in their lives at school and beyond. To summarize, their strategies included: (a) questioning, and prompting their students to question, the "all-knowing teacher" image; (b) involving students in the setting and weighting of assessment criteria; (c) encouraging students to construct conflicting and contradictory meanings of texts; (d) working with students to produce their own meaningful artifacts; and (e) legitimating young people's (sometimes inchoate) resistance to their relative powerlessness in school and beyond. Another strategy (beyond the authority of pre-service teachers) might be changing the internal governance of the classroom or school, ceding more power to students to develop, say, codes of conduct (see, for example, Gillborn, 1995, pp. 122-123 on the importance of student involvement in the successful creation and implementation of an anti-racist school policy; research has found that in many classrooms, teachers early on determine the rules governing students' behaviour without any student consultation [Sarason, 1982, chap. 11]).

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Conclusion

Young's analysis of oppression provides a useful set of concepts for capturing the anti-oppression education work of pre-service teachers and for suggesting what else might be done. For example, a comparison of how a group of pre-service teachers committed to teaching for social justice translated their ideals and concerns into practice with Young's discussion of the five forms of oppression revealed a gap. None of the 12 pre-service teachers discussed, or attempted to counter, the form of oppression that Young refers to as "exploitation" (defined as an unequal "structural relation" wherein "the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the haves", pp. 49-50). I am familiar with a student teacher at the same institution as HSJTEP who did, however, explore the idea

of exploitation of workers in Vietnam by an American-owned multinational corporation, Nike, in a unit on media literacy (see Taylor, 2001, pp. 108-110).

Although I have discussed Young's work on oppression with pre-service teachers for a number of years, I have yet to use it as a framework for an entire course or, within the HSJTEP, a set of courses. It holds much promise, particularly if done in combination with a rich set of stories of how both pre-service and veteran teachers have attempted to counter various forms of oppression in their pedagogy. As stated earlier, Young's approach might make it easier for pre-service teachers to make connections between various "isms" and to look for intersections, rather than get mired in a "hierarchy of oppressions" debate.

I have some concerns about using Young's framework as well. Will it elide important differences between forms of oppression? Will it lead pre-service teachers to over-generalize which groups are oppressed (cf. Fraser, 1997, chap. 8)? Almost every year when talking about poverty, for example, some students who are temporarily feeling the pinch of being a student living on loans make a spurious claim to being oppressed on the basis of class. And once a student cited a *Reader's Digest* article on how commercial advertisements trivialized or made fun of men to claim that men were now the oppressed gender. Mitigating these concerns, however, is the potential I see in the anti-oppressive education approach to counter divisiveness and aid coalition building.

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