

Using Representation to Conceptualize a Social Justice Approach to Urban Teacher Preparation

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Nieto (2000) suggests that “when schools and colleges of education take a stand on social justice and diversity, they can better prepare teachers to work with students of linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds” (p. 183). It is far easier, however, to assert rhetorical commitments than it is to transform them into pedagogy and curriculum. This task is further complicated by the fact that little is known about how to prepare teacher candidates to teach for social justice within relatively large teacher education programs (Zollers, Albert, & Cochran-Smith, 2000), and most college faculty have not had professional development or formal educational experiences that have prepared them specifically for this purpose (Bell, 1997).

In this chapter, I provide a theoretical framework for the development of programs focused on urban teacher preparation by drawing on key ideas from cultural studies, semiotics, feminist theory, and political philosophy. Here *social justice as representation* will be offered as a way to extend the conversation about social justice and education beyond a paradigm that advocates for the redistribution of goods and benefits as the primary solution to inequity. This chapter begins with a brief discussion about teaching for social justice and the distributive paradigm. I then introduce the notion of social justice as representation and describe its relationship to official and

subjugated knowledge about urban education. Finally, I provide suggestions for how to apply this perspective within the context of urban pre-service teacher education programs. As a point of clarification, the word "urban" has been used to describe schools and communities that are located in metropolitan areas where there is evidence of both affluence and poverty within the local geographic area surrounding the school. "Inner-city" on the other hand, is used to describe schools and communities located in areas where there is a high concentration of poverty and few or no signs of prosperity in terms of property, commerce, and human resources.

CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The notion of social justice has many interpretations and is highly contested because it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavors (Rizvi, 1998). The concept of *justice* has been associated with acts of punishment, retribution, and reconciliation, as for example in Judeo-Christian and Islamic texts, and with social, political and economic conditions. According to Novak (2000), the term *social justice* was first used in 1840 by a Sicilian priest, Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio, in an appeal to the ruling classes for the support of displaced urban workers. Novak suggests that the birth of this concept coincided with two shifts in Western history, the "death of God" and the rise of the command economy after the Enlightenment when people began to seek answers to societal problems, not in religion but in science and reason. This increased sense of the capacity of humankind led intellectuals to try to construct a just social order, and in effect accomplish "what even God had not deigned to do" (Novak, 2000, p. 1).

The literature about teacher education for social justice tends to emphasize ways to support the exploration of what it means to pursue justice in the classroom for teacher candidates and faculty alike (see Beyer, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 1995, 1999; McIntyre, 1997; Russo, 2001; and Sleeter, 1995). Notions of what it means to "teach for social justice" find their origins in political, critical, social, and economic theoretical frameworks, and are reflected in liberatory, antiracist, multicultural, and inclusive pedagogies. Each of these approaches (a) encourages the critique of educational systems, (b) acknowledges the structural inequalities embedded in schooling as one of the ways in which unequal access to learning opportunities is perpetuated, and (c) constructs teachers as change agents in and beyond education (Cochran-Smith et al., 1999).

In addition to theoretical and pedagogical traditions, the political struggles of groups fighting for basic human and civil rights have also had a powerful influence on the ways in which educators think about their role in the promotion of social justice. Kohl (1999) goes as far as to suggest that "edu-

cational leadership has never been known for its boldness or originality, in particular when it comes to issues of equity and justice," (p. 310), and that some of the most significant victories for marginalized groups have been won by progressive movements in communities or in the larger society. Two prominent examples that support this argument are the battle to desegregate schools during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, which was spearheaded by the African American community and lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the demand for community control of schools and culturally responsive curriculum which was made by parents and community leaders during the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Although I do not agree that "leadership in public education has never come from the universities or from the schools themselves" (Kohl, 1999, p. 310), it is difficult to deny the enormous influence social movements have had on the ways we think about the connections between social justice and education, and indeed on the theoretical and pedagogical traditions on which we have come to rely.

DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

In their experience of engaging in discussions with teacher education faculty about their understandings of social justice, Zollers et al. (2000) report "all participants agreed that fairness is the *sine qua non* of a socially just society" (p. 7; italics added). John Rawls is probably the individual most commonly associated with the ideal of justice as fairness within the Anglo-American tradition of political philosophy. Influenced by the social and political instability of the 1960s, he described his proposition as a political conception of justice that elaborated on ideas already implicit in constitutional democracies (Solomon & McMurphy, 2000). Rawls attempted to strike a balance between liberty and equality as reflected in the two principles that are fundamental to a justice-as-fairness approach; first, that each person is entitled to the most extensive basic liberty, and second, that all primary social goods should be distributed equally, except in cases where unequal distribution would favor the "least advantaged."

In his seminal work, *A Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971, Rawls (1999) argued that people are born into different life positions and have different expectations of life that are determined, in part, by their society's political system and their economic and social circumstances. Although these positions cannot be justified by merit or desert, he recognized that social institutions favor certain starting positions over others. Because of the inequality this creates, which he presumes is "inevitable in the basic structure of any society," (pp. 7-8). Rawls suggests that a conception of social justice is required in order to provide a standard against which the distributive aspects of the basic structure of society can be evaluated so that political and

economic systems can be regulated accordingly. In education, the social justice as fairness perspective can be identified in the rationale for federally funded programs, such as Headstart and affirmative action, which recognize that students do not begin their schooling on an “even playing field.”

BEYOND THE DISTRIBUTIVE PARADIGM

Although the concern for distribution is crucial to any conception of justice, theories within the distributive paradigm tend to downplay or ignore the social structures and institutional contexts that often help determine distributive patterns in the first place. As a result, Young (1990) contends “a critical theory of social justice must consider not only distributive patterns, but also the processes and relationships that produce and reproduce those patterns” (p. 241). Further, Fraser (1995) suggests that “justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition,” (p.12; italics in the original), and that new conceptions of social justice need to theorize the ways in which economic disadvantage and cultural disrespect are entwined and reinforce each other dialectically because they are both rooted in “processes and practices that systematically disadvantage some groups of people vis-à-vis others” (p. 15).

In her paper, “From Redistribution to Recognition?: Dilemmas of Justice in a ‘Post-Socialist Age,’” Fraser (1995) argues that heterogeneity and pluralism are the norms against which demands for justice are articulated, and that struggles for “recognition of difference” (p. 68) have motivated countless groups in their fight against discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexuality. In education, these movements have often been galvanized in resistance to the status quo where students, parents, educators, and communities have insisted on accommodations or inclusion based on physical ability, or cultural, linguistic and religious differences.

A SOCIAL JUSTICE AS REPRESENTATION APPROACH TO URBAN TEACHER PREPARATION

As previously mentioned, popular conceptualizations of teaching for social justice are rooted in traditions of political philosophy that propose ways to achieve a more just society through distribution. Although this approach is not disregarded within the recognition paradigm, the focus on economic inequities makes it inadequate as a way to theorize about forms of injustice that do not involve the distribution of goods or benefits. Drawing on Fraser’s conceptualization of the *recognition paradigm*, in this chapter I propose social justice as representation as a framework for thinking about discourses and practices used to represent and understand urban students, families, and communities.

It is important to clarify that when using the term *representation*, I am not referring simply to the ways in which marginalized people are framed within the mainstream. These practices are critically important because, historically, this population has not had control over the production of images that portray them, or equal access to the media in ways that would allow them to “tell their side of the story” (McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993, p. xvii). The definition suggested here considers the ways in which bodies are represented in popular culture and interrogates the ways in which “the truth” about these groups is constructed and regulated through normalizing ideologies and the dynamic relationship between knowledge and power. This approach is designed to help candidates understand that what we believe is “reality” is mediated through representations and cultural practices. In the case of urban and inner-city communities, the focus on representation does not deny that some of the “texts” about these environments describe life in ways that would be validated by the people who live in them, but this approach does emphasize that “‘the real’ must be constructed continuously in order to be recognized as such” (Britzman, Santiago-Valles, Jimenez-Monoz, & Lamash, 1993, p.192).

Like the focus on recognition, a social justice as representation framework is primarily concerned with symbolic injustice, including the influence of notions about urban students, families, and communities that frame them as deviant and pathological, or as the primary reason for “their problems.” Fraser (1995) suggests that symbolic injustice requires symbolic change, including the revaluing of disrespected identities and their cultural products, and the “wholesale transformation of social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication” (p. 15). Rizvi (1998) presents these “social patterns” as semiotic in nature, and argues that because students develop a sense of self-worth as they learn the acceptable models of social communication through schooling, “the semiotic issues of representation, interpretation and communication are highly relevant to the concerns for justice in education” (p. 55). In this remark, he refers specifically to students with disabilities, but I believe this viewpoint can be applied more broadly. Efforts to achieve social justice must pay attention to “...the way things are named and represented, the manner in which difference is treated and the ways in which the values and significations and norms which govern life in schools are negotiated and established” (p. 55). The social justice as representation approach suggested here is an attempt to spotlight the ways in which the negative representations of marginalized urban families and communities, uninformed interpretations of their behaviors, values, and attitudes, and disrespectful communication with and about them provide fertile ground for underachievement, social isolation, civic disengagement, and economic disadvantage. Within this framework representa-

tion, interpretation and communication—as both social and semiotic practices—are of paramount importance.

UNDERSTANDING REPRESENTATION

Human beings are born with the need to make sense of their environment and as we mature, our capacity to distinguish and respond to new stimuli helps us to interact with our surroundings. The product of this active relationship between ourselves and the world is often referred to as making meaning. A social justice as representation approach finds its origins in the fields of cultural studies and semiotics, the general study of signs in culture, where culture is understood: as the context within which meaning exists; the dynamic that stimulates the production and dissemination of new meanings; and, the process of meaning-making within social groups (Lewis, 2002). Those meanings, which are assembled together for a particular purpose within a particular historical context, are mediated through language, symbols, signs and “texts” that are formed within systems that are fluid and mutable.

Making meaning requires cognition, where objects, people, and events in the “real” world are correlated with concepts or mental representations in our minds. In this way, they are organized, arranged, and classified in order to establish the relationships between them, or to distinguish them from one another (Hall, 1997). Even though cognition is a function of the brain, it does not happen in a social vacuum; other people help to make up the environment within which learning takes place. As we develop, the sounds and gestures that we use to communicate our ideas and desires become more complicated until making meaning requires a common language through which concepts and ideas become associated with particular words or signs that are used to represent them.

As Hall (1997) explains, because a particular image or word stands for or symbolizes a concept, it functions as a sign—or signifier—that conveys meaning. What carries meaning is not the sign or the concept, but the difference between the sign and other signs. Further, because meaning is relational, it is not bound in the sign but in its symbolic function, and even these are not static. As a result, all signs are arbitrary, and there is no natural relationship between the sign and what it has come to mean. Signs cannot fix meaning because meaning depends on the socially constructed relationship between the sign and the concept. This relationship is fixed by codes, which help to make these links through the practice of interpretation, where information is encoded and meaning is derived as the person receiving it decodes or interprets it (Hall, 1980).

As social actors, we use the conceptual systems of our culture and language to construct meaning and to communicate about the world meaning-

fully to others (Hall, 1997). As a result, according to Ryan (1999), “the process of representation does not allow us simply to mirror the objects, events and people in our experience...this process is socially constructed, and because it is, it is always subject to the forces that shape our social reality” (p. 68). Representation then cannot be understood without paying attention to the interrelationships between discourse, knowledge, and power.

DISCOURSES AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES

Discourses are regulated systems of meanings and representations that produce knowledge about the world by situating these within a symbolic or discursive order. These orders also exclude alternative meanings and meaning possibilities (Lewis, 2002). Discourses involve a set of written and spoken statements, commonly referred to as *texts*, where formulative rules are determined by the interrelationships between speakers and the acceptable procedures and perspectives through which knowledge is appropriated (Alcoff, 1996). Because they also determine the roles that speakers can take and the subject positions the hearer may assume (Foucault, 1972), a discursive practice “sets out the legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge” (Foucault, 1977, p. 199).

The ways of understanding social reality held by the dominant or privileged group(s) are often accepted as part of the natural order by all—including those who are disempowered or marginalized by those views. The result of this is a form of social inequity that is “woven throughout social institutions as well as embodied within individual consciousness” (Bell, 1997, p. 4), or what Gramsci referred to as hegemony (Ives, 2004). Further, hegemonic discourses become embedded within “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980) or networks of social and political control, and operate to oppress others by legitimating what can be said, who has the authority to speak, and what knowledge is accepted as truth (Kreisberg, 1992).

OFFICIAL KNOWLEDGE

Although we don’t often think of the urban education discourse as “hegemonic,” it has at times taken on this character through the research and knowledge bases that support it. In some cases, published research becomes formal, or “official knowledge,” whereas the practical and personal knowledge of school administrators, teachers, para-educators, parents/guardians, and students is often considered to be less reliable. It is the official knowledge then that becomes canonized and applied universally to teaching and learning situations in generalized ways.

“Official knowledge, coupled with the social and political power of those who produce it, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth,’ but also has

the power to *make itself true*" (Hall (1997, p. 49; italics in the original). Therefore, Foucault speaks of "truth," not in the absolute sense, but as a discursive formation that sustains a regime of truth (Hall, 1997). Knowledge is always "inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it is always being applied to the regulation of social conduct" (Hall, 1997, p. 47). Through our work in universities, on research projects, or especially through publication and public speaking, the ideas, beliefs, and viewpoints of teacher educators and educational researchers have become a key source through which knowledge of the profession is gained, regulated, and sometimes used to regulate the conduct of others.

As social scientists, we have developed methodologies within the field that we use to generate knowledge about, and to some extent govern, the practices of teaching and learning. Ryan (1999) suggests that we have the ability to do this "at least in part, by virtue of the status of [our] claims, that is, through [our] appeals to truth" (p. 67). As professors of education, our positions in universities and research institutions situate us as professors of knowledge, and we are endowed with a certain degree of legitimacy that, at the same time, dictates the position of those outside of the academy. Few people are unimpressed by the academic qualifications that most university faculty have earned, and thus equate this with their level of expertise and command of their subjects.

The literature in the field of urban education has been dominated by two concepts: *crisis*, which is associated with failing students, schools, and communities; and *improvement*, where writings tend to focus on effective schools, leadership, intervention programs, school reform, and urban coalitions (Grace, 1994). Although some have criticized it as "unnecessarily limited" in its capacity to appropriately inform efforts to understand and improve the life chances of people living in urban and inner-city communities (Gordon, Miller, & Rollock, 1999, p. 172), educational researchers and scholars have had a tremendous impact on how we think about the schooling of marginalized and minoritized children nonetheless.

During the 1960s, cultural deficit theories were used to explain the underachievement of poor and minority children and determined that academic failure was caused by family structure, attitudes, and values (C. Deutsch, 1964; M. Deutsch & Brown, 1964; John & Goldstein, 1964). In some of these studies, signifiers that have been used over the years, including *ghetto schools*, *children of the street*, and *dysfunctional families*, have helped to pathologize urban and inner-city students, schools, and communities. When children are described as *minority*, *at-risk*, or *failures* in an effort to describe their status or potential, these labels also imply their place in the world and their subject position.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the focus shifted away from children and families to the processes of schooling and the school experiences of diverse

racial, socioeconomic, and cultural groups. In this work, researchers turned to such factors as verbal and nonverbal interaction between teachers and students, conflicting patterns of cultural interaction or "cultural mismatch," and the content of the curriculum as a way to explain differential achievement (Anyon, 1981; Heath, 1983; Rist, 1970; Shannon, 1985). Others have devoted their attention to the social, political, and historical contexts within which schools function (Ogbu, 1981a, 1981b).

In their review of research related to effective instruction for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Brophy and Good (1986) reported that scholars recommended more control and structuring from their teachers; more active instruction, feedback, and redundancy; more review, drill, and practice; and more lower level questions. Teachers were also advised to expose students to less material, emphasize mastery, and "move them through the curriculum as briskly as they are able to progress" (Brophy & Good, 1986, cited in Knapp, Shield, & Turnbull, 1995, p. 183). According to Knapp et al. (1995), this emphasis on "learning deficits, tightly controlled direct instruction, repetitive practice, and the mastery of discrete 'basic' skills has held the status of conventional wisdom among large numbers of practitioners, bolstered by a good deal of research" (p. 183).

SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGE

Subjugated knowledge is that which has traditionally been de-legitimized by other, more dominant forms of knowledge that have dominated the discursive field. During the past 40 years, this de-legitimation has resulted in a body of knowledge about urban and inner-city schools that has been constructed largely by those outside of these communities. The marginalization of knowledge about pedagogy in urban and inner-city schools, and the limited recognition of those outside of the academy who have personal and practical knowledge about these settings (as evidenced by the limited representation of these voices in professional literature, educational research, and the teacher education discourse in general) constitute a form of symbolic injustice. When the knowledge that speaks directly to the education of children in urban settings is not considered to have relevance equal to more official knowledge, what can result is also a form of inequity, as this knowledge is not given equal time within teacher education programs and is included as "add-ons," to the curriculum.

Some efforts have been made to involve teachers and families in the process of institutionalized teacher preparation. For example, the professional development school (PDS) model was designed as a way to bridge the gap between schools and colleges/universities, and is advocated as a way to improve the preparation of urban teachers. Ideally, exemplary teachers mentor candidates during their field placements and these prac-

tioners teach courses in the teacher education program. In addition, university faculty commit to working with the school in various areas including curriculum and professional development. However, even this model has been criticized by Murrell (1998) for reinforcing the "status and power inequalities between educational professionals and low-income parents," primarily due to its "ideology of professional control" (p. 393). These concerns have also been reiterated in the work of Lopez and Scribner (1999), whose review of the research on discourses about parent involvement suggests, "researchers and reforms have not generally accepted the notion that school people might themselves learn from poor parents of color" (quoted in Weiner, 2000, p. 393).

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Any social justice approach to urban and inner-city education should focus on the personal and professional development of beginning teachers, and help prepare them to work for equity and social justice as members of the profession and as active citizens. A social justice as representation approach seeks to include the perspectives, experiences, and expertise of those who learn, teach, live, and work in cities within the urban education discourse. It also encourages the critical examination of the ways in which urban children, families, and communities are represented in our society and in our minds. I now offer a few recommendations for the ways in which pre-service programs might incorporate this perspective.

Teacher education programs concerned with teaching for social justice should include teaching strategies and content that can help candidates understand that difference does not always mean deficit. Building on Young's (1990) notion of the "politics of difference," candidates should be provided with opportunities to conceptualize diversity as dissimilarity and not as deviation from a norm. Within such an approach, teacher candidates would be encouraged to avoid the use of generalizations about students' lives based on stereotypes of the linguistic, ethnic, cultural, or socioeconomic groups with which they are affiliated. Course work would also need to provide readings, activities, and assignments that help them recognize the dangers in practices that "locate problems or pathologies in individuals, families and communities rather than in institutional structures that create and maintain inequality" (Lubeck & Garrett, 1990, cited in Swadener & Lubeck, 1995, p. 3).

Building on the characteristics of successful urban teacher education programs, a social justice as representation approach endorses practices that (a) provide opportunities for candidates to be taught by members of the community and effective urban teachers through well supervised practicum experiences, (b) include and recruit community members as pro-

spective teachers, (c) offer candidates the opportunity to take part in field-based experiences outside of the school building, and (d) value the knowledge that parents/guardians and community members contribute to their children's education.

It is important that candidates preparing to work in urban and inner-city schools do not develop a monolithic view of the nature of these settings. Field placements should provide candidates with first-hand experiences of people and places at opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum as a way to help them understand the complexity of urban environments. Teacher educators would need to encourage the direct interaction between candidates and others in the school and community through activities that are meaningful and that allow them to become members of a situated learning community where they can learn from more experienced others. Most importantly, candidates need to be taught how to be participant observers in settings that are unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable, and how to respectfully question practices within families and the local community that appear to be unfair or discriminatory.

A social justice approach to urban teacher preparation should view the development of teachers' attitudes and beliefs about urban teaching, families, and communities as a primary concern. As such, programs should expose candidates to practical strategies for engaging with all kinds of parents/caregivers as equal partners and advocates for their children. Further, a social justice as representation approach would help teacher candidates recognize that norms and expectations related to teachers' interaction with families are socially and culturally constructed.

CONCLUSION

In the effort to make these or any other suggestions for practice a realistic goal, educational researchers have suggested that the teacher candidates learn about social justice issues integrated into their program and not isolated in a single course (Larkin, 1995; Larkin & Sleeter, 1995; Nieto, 1996). Further, they argue that groups of faculty, not just individual professors, should have enough knowledge and understanding of these issues in order to integrate them into their courses (Zollers et al., 2000). As Garcia (1997) proposes, teaching for social justice requires professional preparation that has the power to not only transform our thinking, but also our lives. Good intentions are not enough to prepare candidates who can "change the world."

Teacher education programs that claim to be committed to social justice must be willing and able to describe and defend the pedagogical and sociopolitical commitments on which they are built. These programs should

be willing to move candidates to places outside of their comfort zones, and unabashedly admit that they have both an agenda and an ideology that are founded on a particular set of tenets, beliefs, and assumptions. Teaching for social justice, like other social movements, should create a collective identity among teacher educators and teacher candidates where together they can develop a different view of themselves and their world. Through a process of *rearticulation* (Omi & Winant, 1986), new subjectivities can be produced by making use of the information and knowledge teacher candidates already have, and introducing new representations of urban and inner-city communities that infuse their prior knowledge with new meaning.

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