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Dispositions for Critical Social Justice Teaching and Learning

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This article examines the social justice dispositions that, when honed and developed over time, enable prospective teachers—and teacher educators—to embrace social justice praxis and persist in their everyday quest for equitable educational conditions, opportunities, and outcomes. Developed through work in a Community of Practice (CoP), these dispositions include radical openness, humility, and self-vigilance. In this article, we define each disposition and explore how they may be cultivated, enacted, and modeled in teacher education. These dispositions, we argue, serve as reminders of the unfinishedness of our work and the effort required to stay the course of equity and justice in the rough waters of the status quo.

Keywords: Social Justice | Dispositions | Teacher Education

Particular kinds of dispositions, combined with particular knowledge and skills, can help to cultivate teacher candidates' ability to teach for social justice (Splitter, 2010). Dispositions move beyond what someone simply “knows, or is able to do” at the current moment (Splitter, 2010, p. 205) and toward what may be possible for a person to do based on their “conscious mental state” (Splitter, 2010, p. 208). Indeed, prospective teachers “are agents whose intentions, beliefs, desires, convictions, and values...cause things to happen” (p. 208). Based on our (the authors') collective experiences as teachers and teacher educators and insight from the literature on critical social justice and anti-oppressive education, we believe that certain dispositions, when honed and developed over time, enable prospective teachers—and teacher educators—to embrace social justice praxis and persist in their everyday quest for equitable educational conditions, opportunities, and outcomes.

As a Community of Practice (CoP) of teacher educators committed to enacting social justice both in and out of the classroom, we have for the last 18 months, challenged one another to cultivate dispositions of (a) radical openness (hooks, 2004); (b) humility (Kumashiro, 2015); and (c) self-vigilance (Applebaum, 2010). These dispositions are essential in facilitating thoughtful interaction with theories of social justice and equity-oriented educational practices and have been central to our work as social justice teacher educators. Reflecting on these dispositions, we recognize that their cultivation is not always easy. Indeed, we have faced a variety of tensions and pitfalls and yet we have persisted, reflecting in our CoP on key lessons we have learned and moving forward in the pursuit of

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equity in our college classrooms and in the classrooms in which our students will teach. In this paper, we elaborate on these three dispositions for social justice teaching and learning and offer strategies we have used to forge ahead in the face of tensions and pitfalls. While these dispositions are prevalent in social justice literature, they have yet to appear in the literature surrounding the development of dispositions in pre-service teacher education. Thus, we begin by defining our usage of the term “disposition,” positioning ourselves in the research literature, and providing background on our experience as members of a social justice-oriented Community of Practice (CoP).

Dispositions

Because there is little consensus in the research literature on the meaning of the term “disposition,” much debate has swirled as to how dispositions might be defined, cultivated, and assessed (Welch, Pitts, Tenini, Kuenlen, & Wood, 2010). Burant, Chubbuck, and Whipp (2007) explained that definitions of dispositions in the research literature cluster into three categories: (a) dispositions as beliefs and attitudes; (b) dispositions as unchanging personality traits; and (c) dispositions as inferred from observable behaviors. Scholars who believe that dispositions are defined by a person’s beliefs and attitudes argue that dispositions are not innate or unchanging, but instead are “learned and developed at anytime” (Cummins & Asempapa, 2013, p. 103). Others have defined dispositions by observing the actions of an individual, such as Welch et al. (2010) who claimed that dispositions are “patterns of observable behavior that become predictable” (p. 181). Alsup and Miller (2014) bridged this divide between belief and observable behavior and argue that “dispositions are the context and culturally specific embodied manifestations of one’s beliefs, values, and judgments about all practices related to the teaching profession” (Alsup & Miller, 2014, p. 199). Villegas (2007) argued similarly that “dispositions are tendencies for individuals to act in a particular manner under particular circumstances, based on their beliefs” (p. 373). Actions, however, do not always need to be physical. An action can be, as Nelson (2015) argued, a mental process or “intelligent habit” (p. 86) unobservable to others. This expansive definition of the term encapsulates both belief and action, but rejects the notion that dispositions are based purely on one’s personality, and, as a result, can never be changed. Indeed, if dispositions are impacted by context and culture, it seems probable that teacher educators have a role to play in cultivating contexts where dispositions can be modified. Building on the work of the aforementioned scholars, we, the authors, define dispositions as the context specific manifestation, whether mental or physical, of one’s beliefs and actions that, while predictable, are capable of change over time. As a result, dispositions can be both habits of mind and observable actions.

Due to the addition of dispositions in the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards and the rise of accreditation requirements in teacher education, the research literature focused on developing teacher dispositions is robust (Burant et al., 2007; Villegas, 2007). Many scholars have focused on how to best measure and assess teacher dispositions as required by the NCATE (Burant et al., 2007; Duplass & Cruz, 2010; Villegas, 2007), others have sought to clarify the meaning of the contested term and suggest practices for cultivating desired dispositions (Carroll, 2005; Schussler, 2006), and still others have attempted both (Welch et al., 2010). However, literature focused on cultivating dispositions specific to social justice teaching and learning

is relatively scarce (Neumann, 2013). According to Neumann (2013), research exploring how to best cultivate dispositions towards critical pedagogy is needed, as critical pedagogy and social justice remain “essentially invisible and irrelevant within K-12 schools” (p. 143). Perhaps the invisibility of social justice in K-12 schools remains because teaching for social justice is hard, emotional work (Chubbuck, 2010). K-12 teachers lack adequate preparation, and many teacher educators are unprepared to scaffold pre-service teachers on their journey to enacting social justice praxis in the classroom. Knowing the difficulty ahead, Chubbuck (2010) argues that teacher educators wishing to foster such commitments in pre-service teachers should work to scaffold pre-service teachers’ learning by acknowledging the emotional work that will occur in their classrooms. This requires that teacher educators acknowledge and affirm the value of teachers’ often implicit knowledge and beliefs about teaching and schools (Neumann, 2013). Then, the teacher educator can begin to introduce some dissonance in order to disrupt pre-service teachers’ intellectual status quo, potentially revising their dispositions. In this paper, we address three mental dispositions (and strategies for developing such dispositions) that teacher educators might bring to their everyday classroom practice to push themselves and their students beyond their current habits of mind. We suggest that these dispositions create the intellectual and social context in which individuals can move toward social justice praxis. This argument represents a decidedly different approach than others have taken, as we suggest that social justice praxis must be cultivated in environments where certain mental dispositions are modeled and encouraged.

Background

Inspired by our experiences in classrooms composed of diverse students, many of whom have been persistently underserved in their educational careers, our experience taking (and, for one of us, teaching) Critical Pedagogy courses, and our work within an elementary teacher preparation program, the authors of this paper formed a Community of Practice (CoP). A CoP, as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) is “a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other...overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98), and should operate as a “naturally occurring learning community” (Wenger, 2010, p. 11). We framed our collaboration as a CoP because we recognized that our goal was to help newcomers to critical pedagogy move toward expertise in critical teaching, or, in the words of Lave and Wenger (1991) to move from peripheral to full participation in the activities of critical teaching. The theory of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wegner, 1991), at the core of a CoP, seemed to capture well what we hoped to accomplish. The central focus of this theory is the notion that learning involves the increased participation of individuals in the practices of a social community (i.e., the community of critical pedagogues) through the construction of identities characteristic of that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It emphasizes that social interactions and engagement within the workplace, our teacher preparation program, are central to the processes of meaning making, and hence learning in practice.

From this perspective, professional learning in education may be conceptualized as a process of increasing participation in the practice of (critical) teaching (Borko, 2004) through the negotiation of meaning (Eraut, 2002; Wenger, 1998), and the development of

competencies as a consequence of engagement with others in practice (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006). Professional learning, therefore, is not necessarily a product of formal, expert instruction but rather a complex blend of social and individual processes (Palinscar et al., 1998) leading to, in our case, a transformation to more critical forms of practice. Grounded in the larger framework of situated learning, this theory challenges the notion of knowledge portability (Korthagen, 2010; Lave & Wenger, 1991) contending that meaning and understanding are inextricably linked to the contexts within which they are situated (Kwakman, 2003; Putnam & Borko, 2000). In other words, learning takes place in the context in which it is applied, which in our case is the elementary teacher preparation program at a large land grant university.

The goal of our CoP was to meet on a regular basis to examine the praxis of critical pedagogy. That is, we wanted to spend time together to discuss connections between theories of critical teaching and the moment-to-moment practice of critical teaching. Each of us had a teaching and/or supervision assignment with elementary teacher candidates and was eager to enact the theories and examples of critical teaching we had studied. We maintained over time a stable schedule of meeting every three weeks for at least 90 minutes. We recorded our meetings and had the recordings transcribed as a means of helping us reflect on our learning, dilemmas, and decisions. Because of the fluidity and developmental nature of CoPs, our work has evolved, as we have grown more knowledgeable and skilled in our collective and individual abilities to define and put into action our social justice beliefs.

Overview of a Theory of Justice Praxis

Although Brown (2005) referred to social justice as “a new anchor for the entire [teacher education] profession,” both conceptual and practical inconsistencies preclude social justice from becoming a mooring of the field (p. 156). Cochran-Smith (2010) characterized social justice as “conceptually ambiguous,” possessing “multiple instantiations and inadequate theoretical grounding” (p. 445). As a result, social justice is vulnerable to becoming “diluted, trivialized or co-opted” (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 445). McDonald and Zeichner (2009) have argued that there is a debilitating lack of intelligibility regarding how the theoretical groundings of teacher education for social justice translate into practice. The lack of clarity enables “institutions with differing perspectives, political agendas, and strategies to lay claim to the same vision of teacher preparation” (McDonald & Zeichner, 2009, p. 595). Boyles et al. (2009) went so far as to say that different groups can act in direct “opposition” to one another, yet claim social justice commitments.

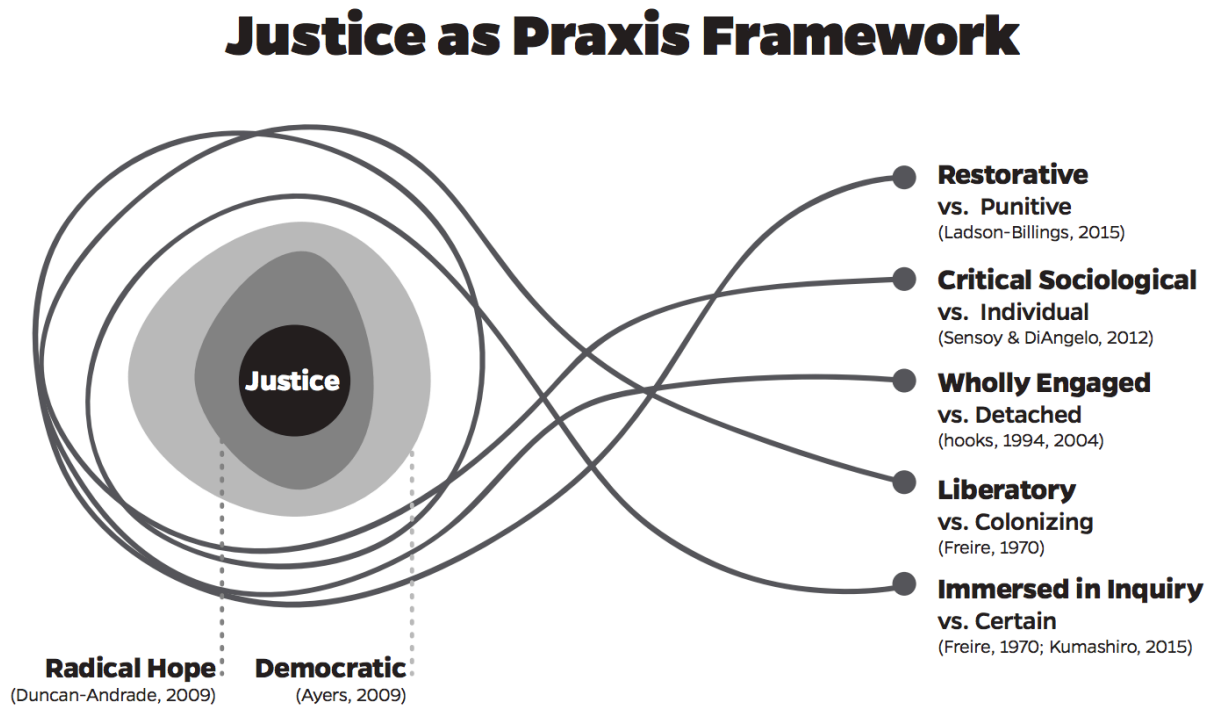
Actively resolving the issues posed by social justice theory in the context of teacher education requires what Cochran-Smith (2010) characterized as a “well theorized idea about the kind of teaching practice that enhances justice” (p. 454). Yet, it is important to make the distinction that teacher education for social justice is not a series of methods or activities, but a “coherent and intellectual approach” to teacher preparation that situates teaching, learning, schooling, and ideas about schooling within historical, socio-political contexts (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 447). Teacher education for social justice thus requires a theory and a theory of practice. A theory of practice, according to Cochran-Smith (2010), is farther-reaching than “simply what, when, or how teachers do things” (p. 454). A theory of practice grounded in social justice considers, “how teachers think about their work and

interpret what is going on in school and classrooms; how they understand competing agendas, pose questions, and make decisions; how they form relationships with students; and how they work with colleagues, families, communities, and social groups” (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 454). That is, the dispositions of teachers and teacher educators matter in social justice teaching and learning.

As part of our maturation as a CoP, we collaboratively developed a theory of justice praxis to guide our reflection and action in the teacher education program. Drawing from Freire’s (1970) notion of praxis, “reflection and action upon the world in order to change it” (p.51), we intentionally use the phrase “justice praxis” rather than “theory of justice” or “theory of justice practice” to communicate our understanding that justice is embedded in theory, action, and outcome. Teacher educators and teachers need a way to think about justice (a theory) in order to know how to enact just practice and achieve just outcomes for students (Cochran-Smith, 2010). In seeking to move toward justice praxis, we do not have a single definition of justice that we wish to prescribe for others, as we fear any canonized assertions may remain abstract and be employed in ways that could lead to the oppression of others. Instead, we have identified seven contours of justice that illuminate what we believe justice looks like, feels like, and sounds like in teacher education, specifically, and community life, broadly. These contours enable us to speak with clarity about justice and extend an invitation for others to do the same. Through seeking a pluralistic understanding of justice, we, therefore, simultaneously call for transparency in how teacher education programs and teacher educators are defining their commitments to justice while leaving room to honor diverse, culturally-situated ways to be just and experience justice. Our theory of justice is an evolving framework that emphasizes the critical (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012), restorative (Ladson-Billings, 2015), engaged (hooks, 1994), liberatory (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), democratic (Ayers, 2009), inquiry-oriented (Kumashiro, 2015), and radically hoped for (Duncan-Andrade, 2009), aspects of justice. We provide a graphic representation and explain this framework in Figure 1.

Justice is at the core of our framework, yet surrounding justice is radical hope (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2002; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 2002). In his book, *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (2002) explained, “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream...I am hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative” to transform the world (p. 8). Duncan-Andrade (2009) expanded on Freire’s writing about hope in his essay inspired by Tupac Shakur’s metaphor about roses that grow in concrete and grounded in his many years teaching high school students. He described “an audacious hope that stares down the painful path; and despite the overwhelming odds against us making it down that path to change, we make the journey again and again because there is no other choice” (p. 191). With great respect for his students, Duncan-Andrade is determined to educate them to transform their own lives and their communities. The radical hope embedded within justice represents a deep and enduring sense of responsibility for the well-being of all people.

Figure 1: Justice as Praxis Framework



To be invested in the well-being of all people – not just those who agree with us – is a challenging, life-changing concept, demanding the very ideas of justice be opened for continual discussion and dissent. To that end, we assert that justice must be democratic. As Hayek (1997) reminded us, to seek to define justice for others and to ascribe that definition to a whole social system is to seek power, not justice. Therefore, we draw on democratic philosophy’s “faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 7). Our radical hope for justice is encircled within a democratic dimension, offering both a reminder and a set of processes for more deeply understanding how others may experience and describe justice differently.

Each dimension of the justice praxis framework offers guidance for determining ways to transform injustice rather than simply mitigate it (Gorski, 2015):

- the critical dimension reminds us that injustice is embedded in systems such that locating and transforming it requires that people look for its historical and sociocultural roots;
- the restorative dimension encourages us to challenge unjust power hierarchies in ways that promote healing for all who have experienced or have been complicit in injustice;
- the engaged dimension recognizes that a person’s full being - mind, body, and spirit - bears the harsh consequences of injustice and therefore must be fully included in efforts to examine and transform it;
- the liberatory dimension helps us question if our actions are fostering freedom and self-determination, or further colonizing others with our own agenda;

- the inquiry dimension challenges us to saturate our understanding of justice in further wondering, acknowledging that understanding, enacting, and striving toward justice is a lifelong process.

Our challenge has been to enact justice praxis in the context of a well-regarded, university-based teacher education program. Recently, the college within which the program is housed was ranked 19th in the nation among teacher education colleges by *U.S.A. Today* and *College Factual*. The elementary program has been ranked 14th in the nation by *U.S. News and World Report*. In addition, the program has been identified as a Center of Excellence by the state's Department of Education (DOE), and it has a spotless record of accreditation by the DOE and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (now the Council for Accreditation of Teacher Preparation). Faculty and doctoral students conduct research on the program and present it at prestigious meetings such as those of the American Educational Research Association and publish in top tier journals. In addition to its state and national status, program faculty are particularly proud of the program's commitment to high quality, inclusive education, and to its special focus on students with high incidence disabilities and English language learners. Along with its many accolades and accomplishments, the program's students and faculty look much like teacher education students and faculty across the U.S. They are predominantly white, female, and from middle and upper middle class backgrounds. Given their socialization and histories as members of dominant social groups—white and middle class in particular—it is not surprising that they (and we) may find it difficult to recognize injustice and the roles we play in its perpetuation. This is where the social justice dispositions become central to our work.

Social Justice Dispositions

Enacting the multi-contoured theory of justice praxis requires the cultivation of environments in which injustice and its roots can be examined and alternatives can be imagined. As Chicago-based teacher and teacher educator, Gregory Michie (2012) wrote, “Teaching for social justice, in practice, is as much about the environment you create as it is about the explicit lessons you teach” (p. 5). The dispositions we describe help to create the environment in which social justice praxis is possible.

Radical Openness

hooks (2004) based her vision of radical openness on the habits of intellectuals she admired. The academics, writers, readers, thinkers, and political activists she described exhibited openness to ideas and the ability to engage in challenging, probing, and penetrating dialogue with diverse audiences. She explained that the habit of radical openness was bolstered by people's willingness to dialogue in spaces where “transformation is possible” (2004, p. 153). This transformative space, hooks (2004) argued, is on the margins. It is not a “marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures”, but a “marginality one chooses as a site of resistance - a place of radical openness and possibility” (p. 159). Deciding to move to the margins is a conscious choice

representing the first breath of a lifelong commitment to challenging unjust applications of power in solidarity with those most vulnerable to oppression.

This movement to the margins, however, is in direct opposition to the canons of teacher education programming and scholarship, which tend to exalt standards, research-based instructional methods, and assessments that assert what is true, normal, and desirable (Kumashiro, 2015). As Wheatley (2002) reminded us,

We weren't trained to admit we don't know. Most of us were taught to sound certain and confident, to state our opinion as if it were true. We haven't been rewarded for being confused or asking more questions rather than giving quick answers. We've spent years listening to others mainly to determine whether we agree with them or not. We don't have time or interest to sit and listen to those who think differently than we do. (p. 34)

Our teacher candidates, our colleagues, and ourselves have largely been socialized in the same way; we are products of a new managerialism that seeks to measure, with certainty, the worthiness of a person or program (Kumashiro, 2015). This certainty affords us the comfort of knowing, yet it ultimately blinds us to the creation and reproduction of systemic injustices forged by racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. In order to cultivate radical openness, teacher educators must seek to move to the margins, developing dialogical spaces where uncertainty, wondering, and re-imagining schooling are valued activities.

For people who have been taught well to strive for truth, knowledge, and certainty, working in the margins can foster fear and vulnerability, emotions people typically seek to avoid. hooks (1989) explained that we are able to move to the margins only through “suffering and pain, through struggle” (p. 209). To move to a place of radical openness on the margins is to move to a place of uncertainty and confusion (Wheatley, 2005). “Paradoxically,” the answers to the complex, intersecting problems of our society can only be found by “admitting we don't know” and recognizing “no one person or perspective can give us the answers we need” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 34). Being radically open demands a “willingness to be disturbed” (Wheatley, 2005), a willingness to be shaken to the core of our being, to have everything we once held as truth and righteousness stripped away as we move towards immersing ourselves in the realities of others and recognizing our own complicities in their oppression and our power to influence their reality. This is not to say that we must “let go of what we believe,” but instead simply be “curious about what someone else believes,” acknowledging that “their way of interpreting the world may be essential to our survival” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 35). With our willingness to be disturbed, we are “transformed, individually, collectively, as we create radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world” (hooks, 2004, p. 159).

A way to begin fostering the restless curiosity (Freire, 1970) that begets radical openness and helps us move to the margins, is to encourage teacher candidates and teacher educators to begin noticing their feelings, in addition to their thoughts on the issues being studied and discussed. Specifically, we seek to notice and to encourage our colleagues and students to begin noticing the visceral experience of being “torpified” (Diller, 1998) by what others say or write. That is, we seek the “ability to be awed, to be surprised, to be

astonished, to be moved in a deeply moral, or ethical, or aesthetic, or epistemological, or ontological way” (Diller, 1998 quoted in Applebaum, 2013). By focusing on what surprises us, Wheatley (2005) argued, we are able to better know our own beliefs and assumptions. Our shock at the position of others reveals our own position and, in that moment, we are given the opportunity to determine if we still value what we initially believed (Wheatley, 2005). As we grapple with our emotions and encourage our students and colleagues to do the same, we must also provide space for others to share how our words make them feel. The simple question, “How are you feeling, Jamie?” invites feelings into the conversation that may have remained contained within the body and veiled by platitudes of certainty. The ability to welcome diverse opinions and emotions in order to extend our own understanding is the heart of radical openness, offering “unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing” to those who are willing to exist at the margins (hooks, 1989, p. 203).

Humility

Radical openness is fueled by a person’s humility about what they know. In his discussion of anti-oppressive education, Kumashiro (2015) described the importance of recognizing that one’s knowledge represents only a portion of all available knowledge. Similarly, Freire (1998) wrote of the importance of recognizing our “unfinishedness.” When people have the humility to recognize that their knowledge is partial, that they are not complete products, they are more inclined to be radically open to new ways of thinking and knowing, to considering new perspectives, interpretations, and possibilities. A humble disposition toward one’s own knowledge requires that one understand the role played by socialization processes in shaping beliefs, values, and norms and that all people are not subject to the same socialization processes; therefore, people are apt to develop different knowledge. Although schools have perpetuated the view that there is one, legitimate body of knowledge (Apple, 2014), critical scholars have repeatedly illustrated that knowledge is always connected to the particulars of the context (Freire, 1970). As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) illustrated in their summary of the parable, Hodja and the Foreigner, history and culture combine to shape what “counts” as knowledge such that speakers can believe they have understood one another when they have actually completely misunderstood what the other confidently attempted to communicate.

It is not surprising that people in dominant positions assume that their knowledge is widely shared. Although they might have collided with the partiality of their knowledge if they were embedded in an entirely unfamiliar culture, they are more likely to have interacted with people and institutions that share their knowledge. In order to engage in justice praxis, teacher candidates and teacher educators must allow themselves to entertain some uncertainty about their knowledge. That is, they need the humility to recognize that their knowledge is partial.

Recognizing that knowledge is partial is unlikely to “[bring] about comfort and closure” (Kumashiro, 2015 p. 28). On the contrary, moving toward a disposition of humility toward one’s knowledge is likely to elicit dissonance and discomfort, thereby dissuading the dialogue that is sorely needed in order to make sense of the unfamiliar (Garrett & Segall, 2013; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). With this in mind, teacher

educators must attend to signs of student discomfort and classroom dissonance and help students cope with their feelings and remain engaged.

Garrett and Segall (2013) have pointed out the value of careful questioning that invites students into the conversation rather than pushing them away or shutting them down. In this way, questioning is invitational rather than combative, creating inclusive rather than exclusionary dialogue. Questioning of this nature serves a dual purpose, as it seeks to personally check in with students and help them to “re-coordinate and reconsider” (Garrett & Segall, 2013 p. 301) content that can produce dissonance, confusion, and distress. Questions, such as the following, might be used to cultivate humility and support learners in recognizing partial knowledge and exploring different perspectives: What just occurred here? What may have happened that intensified emotions? Were there new ideas or insights that disturbed us? How did those ideas make you feel? Engaging in this type of questioning during dialogue invites students to recognize and name their feelings, to know that their feelings are valued, and to notice that new knowledge may evoke emotional responses.

Establishing a willingness to be disturbed, as described earlier, could certainly help to cultivate the disposition of humility. Educators who allow themselves to feel unsure and even confused are well on their way to being able to acknowledge that their knowledge represents a small slice of the available knowledge. Educators must keep in mind, of course, that acknowledging there is much they do not know is merely a first step. We cannot be complacent in our newly found comfortable state of not knowing. Rather, we are reminded by Kumashiro (2015), Freire (1998), Freire and Macedo (2005), hooks (2004) and others that because our knowledge is partial, we must sustain a restless curiosity and a radical openness to broadening and deepening our knowledge of the world in order to engage in social justice praxis.

Self-Vigilance

Applebaum (2010) and others (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2013; Mayo, 2000) reminded us that it is not enough to proclaim that we have embraced dispositions of radical openness and humility. Indeed, we have to remain vigilant that we do not disrupt these dispositions—even when vigilance brings discomfort. Writing specifically about race, racism, and white vigilance, Applebaum drew on Butler (2004) to examine three features of vigilance that have been pertinent to our practice as social justice educators. These features, “critique, staying in the anxiety of critique, and vulnerability” (Applebaum, 2013, p. 17), allow teacher candidates and teacher educators, many of whom are members of dominant groups, to dialogue with humility and to listen “to the anger of the marginalized when they express their experience with injustice *even when such anger implies complicity of those who are systemically privileged*” (Applebaum, 2013, p. 33, italics in original). Prospective teachers must be able to critique society *and* self, acknowledging that we all play a part in oppressing or resisting oppression (Applebaum, 2013).

Indeed, self-vigilance is the acknowledgement of ignorance, the critique of one’s own ideologies, and the commitment to remaining ever aware of one’s own blind spots (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Applebaum (2013) noted that self-vigilance requires “remaining in the discomfort” (p. 34) and anxiety of critique, as this is where learning and growth can occur. The cognitive dissonance that arises from critique is often uncomfortable and new to many prospective teachers, but necessary to their growth as social justice educators.

Teacher educators commonly argue that prospective teachers “need some degree of dissonance to enable them to take the cognitive leaps and risks necessary for reflective and transformative learning” (Galman, 2009, p. 471). Developing the disposition of self-vigilance is not only beneficial in the quest for more equitable educational environments, but for the pursuit of knowledge more generally.

One’s willingness to be self-vigilant is a willingness to remain vulnerable. Applebaum (2013) explained, “Vigilance is a form of critique that is willing to stay in the anxiety of vulnerability and remain open to the unsettlement of anger” (p. 33). Just as the critical educator is “always evolving, always encountering new ways to irritate dominant forms of power” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2013, p. 407), the self-vigilant student and instructor in the social justice classroom must be willing to turn a critical eye onto themselves, implicating themselves in systems of oppression. Self-vigilance encourages the problematizing of knowledge, language, assumptions, and practices. Cultivating self-vigilance as a disposition acknowledges that educators are not perfect or “fully formed” (Galman, 2009, p. 471) social justice practitioners. A self-vigilant educator is one who is prepared for continued learning, who can evolve and transform through a willingness to be vulnerable. Thus, self-vigilance is a key disposition for the social justice educator who wishes to promote teaching and learning about issues with which many teacher candidates are unfamiliar and sometimes resistant to considering.

Despite the critical need for self-vigilance, it can be difficult to cultivate with pre-service teachers and difficult to maintain as an instructor. Indeed, even critical researchers and critical teachers focus their critiques outward onto society or institutions and in so doing fail to implicate themselves in the systems of oppression that govern our lives. Colorblindness, or the inclination to ignore racial difference, powerblindness, the “denial of power-related difference” (Castagno, 2013, p. 108), and internalized dominance, or the condition in which “members of the [dominant] group accept their group’s socially superior status as normal and deserved” (Griffin, 1997, p. 76 quoted in Tappan, 2006, p. 2116), can all impact one’s ability to be self-vigilant, as these dominant ideologies surround us from birth and are reinforced in our families, schools, and media. Importantly, Castagno reminds us that although “racism often operates without conscious intent, lack of intentionality does not translate into an absence of responsibility” (p. 107). As Castagno (2013) and Tappan (2006) argued, the phenomena of colorblindness, powerblindness, and internalized dominance obfuscate reality and stand in the way of making the world a “more compassionate, and more liberating place for all people” (Tappan, 2006, p. 2140). As a result, these phenomena must be acknowledged and combatted. Combating these oppressive ideologies does not imply a sort of self-policing, but instead a form of self-liberation, as acknowledging the limiting and controlling forces that shape our thinking is the first step towards freeing ourselves of such forces.

In our work as teacher educators committed to social justice we encounter these phenomena in our classrooms and in our daily lives. By themselves they are dangerous, but when they stand in the way of self-vigilance their danger is compounded. To combat these phenomena and the corresponding resistance many students bring with them to the classroom, we encourage and practice a set of strategies with our students, including the practice of centering and recentering. Centering and recentering helps students place someone else’s reality and experience at the center of the conversation. In short, students are asked to listen to each other’s experiences deeply, all the while suspending the urge to

agree or disagree. The goal of centering/recentering activities is not agreement or consensus, but deeper understanding. Takacs (2003) explained that the power of suspending the urge to argue is in the ability to forego the “reconfirming dialogue” (p. 27) many of us have with ourselves. If students can come to see from another’s worldview, Takacs argued, they are more likely to be able to critically examine their own worldview. Similarly, Frye (1983) encouraged us to avoid being “arrogant perceivers” who insist on filtering all of our observations and experiences through the familiar lens of our own experience. Thus, challenging ourselves and our students to consider the several ways in which various actors might interpret the same scenario can foster insight into the limitations of arrogant perceiving and the value of placing another’s perspectives at the center. When we monitor our tendency for arrogant perception, we practice the self-vigilance that cultivates an environment for social justice teaching and learning.

Cultivating Environments for Social Justice Praxis

Our Community of Practice is grounded in the work of Freire (1970), who compelled educators to engage in “praxis: reflection and action on the world in order to transform it” (p.51). Critical reflection involves “reading the world” in ways that illuminate the structural constraints of injustice and inequity that shape our communities and schools (Freire & Macedo, 2005). Intimately connected to critical reflection is critical action-- planning for and facilitating the structural changes identified and interpreted during reflection. Our justice praxis is in a perpetual state of becoming as we strive to unlearn the lessons we have been taught about who we are and how schools and teacher education programs should be. In many ways, we are only a few steps ahead of our students and essentially building a social justice plane as we’re flying it.

The dispositions we have described—radical openness, humility, self-vigilance—guide our journey. They serve as reminders of the unfinishedness of our work and the effort required to stay the course of equity and justice in the troubling air of the status quo. As we continue to cultivate the dispositions, we also strive to cultivate them within our students. In doing so, we practice another disposition, patient persistence. Patient persistence is not always easy to sustain when we might prefer to shake a student and scream, “That’s outrageous! How can you believe such a thing?!” At these moments, we remind ourselves that our students have learned their lessons well. They have learned what the world has taught them about themselves and other people. They have developed their “common sense” of the world and rarely have they considered that their common sense might not be universally embraced, nor might it serve all people equally well (Kumashiro, 2015). We take a breath. We practice patient persistence.

Patient persistence means that we recognize that social justice praxis is, to borrow a metaphor, a marathon, not a sprint. In forging ahead, we attempt to provide our students with a variety of guided experiences that are likely to challenge their common sense. These experiences are often in the form of readings, videos, and events that feature characters unfamiliar to the mostly white and middle class students. That is, they challenge the students’ tendency to be arrogant perceivers by shedding light on another slice of reality. For instance, students can be coached to practice their radical openness and humility by watching a video portraying the very different school experiences of middle school boys attending different schools within the same school district (Unequal Education Revisited:

Failing our Children, 2014). Similarly, reading and responding to a children's book such as *George* by Alex Gino, which explores the life of a fourth-grade transgender girl, or *Large Fears* by Kendrick Daye and Myles E. Johnson, which follows the dreams and fears of a queer, black protagonist who wants to travel to Mars, can disrupt students' common sense about gender, sexuality, love, and family. As students in our Introduction to Education course are asked to engage in community asset mapping individually and then in collaboration with children in their volunteer placements, we unsettle their common sense that home is limited to the campus, that neighborhoods they have been taught to think of as "bad parts of town" have no assets worth exploring, and that, as temporary residents, they are not part of the broader community and thus have no obligation to become invested in community issues. And, when we teach our students how to identify the resources, or cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), of children who attend an after-school program in a public housing neighborhood, we challenge their common sense, deficit-based perspective of those children and their families.

While activities such as these are important, they must be enacted in a particular environment. We again cite Michie's words about teaching:

Once you're in a classroom of your own, you begin to realize that it's in the details, as much as in the big picture theorizing, that critical conceptions of teaching find life. [People] can learn about equity and justice from the way community is formed in a classroom, how decisions are made, who is represented on the walls and bookshelves, what sorts of interactions are encouraged and discouraged, whose thoughts and ideas are valued, and yes, even what's on the bulletin boards. (p. 5)

In other words, the fabric of life in the classroom, including the teacher education classroom, teaches as much, if not more, than the explicit lessons the instructor has planned. The dispositions we have described weave the fabric of classroom life. In cultivating them, teacher educators help to develop their own and their students' social justice praxis. By developing the dispositions of a social justice educator, teacher educators equip teacher candidates with a "coherent intellectual approach" (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 447) to help them "think about their work and interpret what is going on in school and classrooms; ... understand competing agendas, pose questions, and make decisions; ... form relationships with students; and ... work with colleagues, families, communities, and social groups" (Cochran-Smith, 2010, p. 454). We strive toward a "coherent intellectual approach" in order to invite colleagues into social justice praxis related to the teacher education program and the college within which it is housed. Guided by radical hope, we are determined to "read the world" of our teacher education program by collectively identifying and planning to resolve the structural and philosophical constraints that limit teaching for social justice within our institution. Our success will depend in large part on our ability to cultivate the dispositions of radical openness, humility, and self-vigilance within our workplace.

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