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LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN OUR CLASSROOMS AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

“Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

—Benjamin Franklin

SETTING THE STAGE

This chapter introduces five steps for beginning social justice and equity work in our classrooms and learning communities: concept stabilization, concept calibration, identity development, equity audit, and taking action. Each of these steps is critical in building the foundation of a more equitable school and aligns to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Concrete strategies, steps, and protocols are offered in each step.

Just as you can't reap fabulous produce without hard work and healthy soil, you also can't begin to transform your learning environment without taking concrete action steps to prepare an academic and social environment for the growth that will occur. When our vegetables don't grow, we don't blame the soil. We have to work to determine how to change the soil so it better supports growth. Similarly, to transform our classrooms and learning communities, our approach must be grounded in diagnostics and not deficits.

Our “soil” must be nourished with the notion that all learners, with no exceptions, can and will succeed. To some, these are lofty ideas, but to those who are committed to being agents of change, who have dedicated themselves to transforming the experience and life of the learners who our system has forgotten, these ideas are our truth and way of life and will result in fabulous growth for all students. This foundational work, as we call it, will ensure that your classroom, learning community, school, or district is primed and ready to implement the strategies that follow.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that can transcend classroom instruction. Systemic barriers prevent students from accessing and engaging with high-quality instruction. Just as UDL can be used as a framework for lesson planning, it can also be used for reflective professional learning and designing classrooms and systems that work for students academically, behaviorally, socially, emotionally, and culturally.

To offer a universally designed framework for beginning social justice work in your school, we have outlined a series of five steps that are critical in creating foundations for social justice and equity. These five steps address potential barriers that have the potential to derail social justice work. These potential barriers include but are not limited to the following:

- **Step 1: Concept Stabilization.** Critical to build a shared understanding of what social justice is and/or why it is necessary
- **Step 2: Concept Calibration.** Helps to build agreement and define what socially just, universally designed practice looks like in practice
- **Step 3: Identity Development.** Provides an opportunity for all teachers to embrace their own identity and recognize bias, including but not limited to implicit bias
- **Step 4: Equity Audits.** Provides evidence on the differences in student experience as a result of race, class, gender, sexual and gender identity, ability, language, and/or religion.
- **Step 5: Taking Action.** Empowers educators to take action against inequity, oppression, and discrimination

The steps that follow address some of these barriers by providing options and choices for you, as educators, to help to “fertilize the soil,” where equity can grow.

CONCEPT STABILIZATION: DEFINING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN YOUR CONTEXT

Educators at the Putnam Avenue Upper School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, value diversity and have collectively defined “social justice” as recognizing the different experiences that come with race, class, gender, sexual identity, ability, language, and religion. On their website, they state, “We believe it is our responsibility to use this knowledge to better the world we live in.”

We share this as an example of the first condition of a social justice education. You must be able to define “social justice” for your classroom, team, and school, then create a shared vision of what social justice is in order to build a foundation for growth. After reading Chapter 1, take an opportunity to define “social justice” for yourself in the space that follows. If you have the opportunity to share your definition with a professional learning community or colleagues, please do. We have to normalize conversations about social justice, and that begins with our ability to name what social justice is.

Define “social justice” in the space below:

Every classroom, school, and district is different so the implementation of strategies and practices to support the pursuit of social justice will vary based on the context. At the same time, regardless of context, if a commitment to social justice cannot be explicitly named, then there is no real commitment to being socially just.

We truly believe that you have to start somewhere, and it’s never too late to name *for your students* what social justice is and what you are doing about it. It doesn’t matter if it’s during the first quarter, term, semester, or your final class of the year. Our challenge to you is to explicitly name and introduce social justice to your students and/or team, and engage them in creating or renewing a commitment to a shared vision for your work.

We suggest sharing a snapshot of what to expect from an introduction to social justice so you heighten the salience of goals and objectives and highlight that social justice is on the map and is important. Here is a sample lesson that you can use or adapt for this first and crucial step. Although the lesson is designed for middle to high school students, it can be adapted to elementary students by providing more scaffolding and initial exposure to concepts of social justice through read-alouds, short videos, and/or explicit vocabulary instruction on what “fair” and “unfair” mean, and how they relate to the concept of social justice.

The Time for Equity Is Now! Protocol

Objectives:

- Reflect on our current understanding of social justice, as well as the impact of power and privilege on academic success.
- Create a shared definition of “social justice.”

Warm-Up:

Entrance Ticket: as students enter the classroom, have an entrance ticket where they have to complete a sentence like, “If I had to define “social justice,” I would define it as. . . .” You can provide the option to fill out a hard copy of the ticket or contribute on a Padlet or Google Doc. Arrange all the tickets on the wall and project electronic submissions. This is a great opportunity to model reflection live and begin a conversation about the importance of creating one definition as a learning community. Be bold and share the definition you created with your students.

The Why:

If you have technology available, have a QR code or bit.ly waiting for students that brings them to the Google Doc with multiple options for them to explore resources about social justice. Instead of “Now we’re all going to read an article,” lead them to a page that notes “You will have 10 minutes to explore a resource to build background knowledge on why a renewed emphasis on social justice is critical. You can watch a video, read an article, and so forth.”

If you don’t have technology available, you may want to create stations where students can explore books, and articles, talk to a guest speaker, or watch a short video on a single device. The options are endless! This not only helps them explore concepts of justice in engaging ways but also may be your first step into implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in your classroom to optimize choice.

The What:

- We stole this idea from a rock star teacher/friend, Tara Trainor. The activity is called “Pass the Plate.” After exploring resources and seeing everyone’s initial definitions of “social justice,” provide students with a prompt, as in, “What are all the words that come to mind when you think of social justice?” Then, put them in groups of four or five students and give every person in the group a marker and one cheap paper plate per group. Set a timer for two minutes and have groups feverishly write their ideas as they pass their plate around. Activities like this ensure participation from all group members and provide the option for physical activity. When the two minutes are done, collect and display the plates. Allow everyone to take a quick learning walk to view everyone’s answers before coming back and beginning a discussion.

This is a great way to build background knowledge, optimize reflection, and build community—in only a couple of minutes.

- 10 minutes: Working in dyads or groups of three, participants share their updated definitions of “social justice” using the resources they have explored as well as the products of the Pass-the-Plate activity and combine them into a single (collective) definition. They then write their definition on large chart paper or use a digital platform.
- 10 minutes: As a whole group, participants review all posted statements and highlight critical concepts, words, and ideas that resonated from each group’s contribution.

Wrap-Up:

As a ticket out, have each learner share how their understanding of social justice changed throughout the class. Consider providing them with options to share their perspective: Create a Twitter hashtag, post a Padlet, and provide a hard copy of the ticket or a link to the Google form. This allows for multiple means of action and expression.

We can’t emphasize enough the importance of an entire school community engaging in Concept Stabilization as well as the remaining four steps. The previous protocol can also lend itself to a variety of professional learning settings including but not limited to PLCs, faculty meetings, and school or district leadership teams. Consider how you can introduce or facilitate the protocol with your team to get the conversation going. If your school is already committed to social justice, the activity can still be a great review activity to reflect on the work you have done. The following chapter will provide an in-depth exploration of how you can apply an equity/social justice lens to the work of your PLCs.

CONCEPT CALIBRATION: NOW THAT WE’VE DEFINED IT, WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

In addition to naming a commitment to social justice and defining the term, it’s imperative that classroom communities as well as the wider school community calibrate their understanding. Calibration is the second foundational condition for social justice and perhaps the easiest one to overlook or take for granted.

By “calibration” we mean providing an opportunity for stakeholders to be made aware of the definition as well as to develop a shared understanding or interpretation of the common definition and what it looks like in practice. If there is no calibration, then it is very likely that efforts to act on your definition of “social justice” will be inconsistent or, even worse, counterproductive.

Calibration, in many research studies, focuses on interrater reliability, which is the degree of agreement among raters or the consensus they have when interpreting a concept. A common example of this is studying the scores assigned by evaluators when asked to respond

to whether a particular student (or educator) came close to meeting a designated standard.

All stakeholders in a socially just system must have strong interrater reliability when it comes to unpacking and aligning practice to the district or school's definition of "social justice." To put it simply, all members of the community should agree on what a socially just education looks like and understand the concrete actions and strategies that ensure more equitable outcomes for all students. This is incredibly important because a "firm goal" of social justice ensures that all learning is designed in order to provide pathways to the goal. Since UDL is all about "firm goals, flexible means," different educators may provide variable learning experiences, but all of them lead to equitable opportunities for all students to learn.

One great way to begin this work at the classroom level is to watch videos and ask students to make a list of teaching strategies and actions that they believe promote social justice, while also noting those that would create barriers through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Similarly, the adults in the school community should take the time to engage in calibration activities. As an example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website has a tool for educators and administrators called the Calibration Video Library. The videos, which represent a range of teacher practices, are not meant to be exemplars. Rather, they serve a developmental purpose in that they allow educators to collaboratively analyze the videos and compare notes on the effectiveness of the teaching practices depicted in the clips, using an Educator Evaluation rubric. We argue that these videos can also be used to calibrate a shared understanding of social justice. [Note: anyone can access these videos at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/eval/resources/calibration/>]

After watching short videos, whether you are working with your students or with colleagues, all should review their notes and begin to create a "look-fors" tool in a shared document that could then be shared with teachers as they implement instructional rounds to see evidence of effective social justice practice throughout the school.

As an example, consider the complexities of understanding what it means to create a foundation for social justice by fostering trauma-informed practice. Oftentimes, when learning about pedagogical practice, seeing the practice in action helps to provide a visual representation.

Trauma-informed practice is focused on approaching the teaching and learning process with an informed understanding of the impact trauma can have on learners (Cavanaugh, 2016).

Given that so many students experience trauma, it is important that educators be aware of the impact of trauma as they design learning experiences for students. When teachers are trauma-informed, they can play a major role in improving

educational outcomes for the more than 25% of students who encounter physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive experiences that are perceived as traumatizing (Crosby, 2015).

Stress and trauma are both barriers that need to be named and taken into consideration to ensure that all students can be fully present. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience have taught us that stress and/or trauma can potentially manifest as physiological barriers to learning by triggering a fight-or-flight response. It is key to note what actually happens in the brain once this natural protective response is invoked—the brain is flooded with the chemical cortisol, which cuts off access to the neocortex (the part of the brain where thinking and the processing of new thoughts takes place) as well as to long-term memory. It takes on average three full hours before the cortisol is gone. As social justice educators, we need to ensure that our actions and practices are not unintentionally triggering this response in our students, by proactively using UDL lens to removing things from our practice that may manifest as barriers due to insensitivity to stress and/or trauma.

Using the UDL lens, trauma-informed practices are designed to minimize barriers for students who experience trauma and stress. A colleague who is an expert in trauma-informed practice is Alice Cohen. Cohen had been a theatre teacher for 20 years when she transitioned to children’s residential treatment programs. Her years with these young people taught her how to shape the environment and intervention to create the conditions for success. Alice has tremendous respect for these young strivers, and in her current role as the Lead Teacher for Social Emotional Learning for the Cambridge Public Schools, she continues to help schools build the capacity of the adults to understand and respond to traumatized and stressed learners and to create classroom environments that are informed by the current research of the neurobiology of trauma.

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

BY ALICE COHEN

We cannot minimize the impact of trauma and toxic stress on learning. Marginalized populations affected by poverty and violence come to school with additional burdens: The growing brain can be hijacked by the intensity of this stress. These students are more likely to use behavior as the method for emotional communication. These behaviors can be impulsive and intense. Traumatized students are more likely to be suspended for what appears to be egregious behavior but is, in reality, emotional communication related to help-seeking behavior.

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A school can implement best practices for learners who experience trauma in the following ways:

- Providing professional development to all of the adults in the learning setting. This training describes the impact of trauma on the developing brain, tools, and strategies for understanding and intervention, particularly in the area of teaching self-regulation and relationship-building.
- Providing opportunities for adults to check in frequently about the experience of students. Is there time in the schedule for this? How is it monitored?
- Creating systems of support for young people both in and out of the classroom. What supports are available for all students academically, behaviorally, and socio-emotionally?
- Creating conditions in the classroom to increase a sense of soothing and containment. Are there conditions of nurture?
- Building systems of restorative practice for young people.

Next Steps

- Again, these practices shouldn't be limited to actions of adults in the school community. Consider sharing the practices with students as you ask them the following questions to help calibrate their understanding of socially just education and optimize their voices so you ensure that you design options and choices that work for them. Each question aligns with one of the best practices noted by Cohen.
- The following calibration protocol can be used in your classrooms to help refine teacher and student understanding of socially just curriculum and instructional practices. The activity, which requires access to videotaped lessons such as the aforementioned Massachusetts calibration video collection, can also be adopted for use in your professional learning communities or team meetings. Alternatively, individual teachers are encouraged to share the results of the student activity with their PLCs as a way of further honing the staff understanding of teaching practices that promote social justice.

Reflection Questions

- What are the best ways for teachers to check in on students academically? Behaviorally? Socially emotionally? For example, do you prefer informal check-ins every day, check-ins via technology, scheduled meetings, and so forth?
- What supports in class help you to feel successful and a part of the community?
- What practices help you to feel cared for in the classroom?
- If you do something that requires discipline, what are the most effective ways to help you to not repeat the behaviors?

Additional Resource

- The School Justice Partnership, which provides an overview of the impact of trauma on students, offers strategies for creating trauma-informed classrooms. You can download this guide at <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/resources/trauma-informed-classrooms>

Calibrating Our Understanding Social Justice Protocol

Objectives:

- Translate our “social justice” definition into a list of “look-fors.”
- Calibrate our understanding of our social justice “look-fors.”

Warm-Up:

Display the “social justice” definition that was created in a previous class or team meeting. Line a table with chart paper and ask everyone to list practices or draw pictures that help to align to the definition of “social justice.” You may want to start by providing exemplars also. For example, you may identify such practices as allowing students to choose to study books written by authors who look like them or offering students the opportunity to share their knowledge through multiple means of expression.

The Why:

Once everyone sits down, ask them to review their brainstormed list of “look-fors” and then share that everyone is going to have an opportunity to view the practice of a classroom teacher to determine the teacher’s effectiveness in creating a socially just classroom. It’s important to note that one cannot rate a teacher in such a short amount of time, but it does provide a foundation to discuss what practices provide students with equal opportunities to learn.

The How:

1. Before watching the video, ask students to discuss what they hope to see. For example, what type of teaching would provide students with equal opportunities to succeed? This discussion will minimize errors based on the interactions between raters and the task. For example, “What would a socially just middle school math class look like?” “How can teachers empower students to embrace their identity and foster collaboration?”
2. Once everyone has discussed what to look for, play the video for 5 minutes. After viewing the video, ask students, “How would you feel about being in that class? Did you see anything that would make you feel like the teacher valued social justice?” Alternatively, you can ask, “Did you see anything that would make you feel like the teacher didn’t value social justice? Why and how could he or she have used different practices?”

Wrap-Up:

Ask students to share what they learned about social justice, teaching, and learning by observing teacher practice. Through this activity, you will begin to understand what students need from the classroom in order to feel challenged, supported, respected, and embraced for all their variability. Consider making a list of “look-fors” that you can incorporate into your practice. You can then ask them to reflect and provide you with feedback on your practice. Even if you teach early elementary, you can facilitate conversations about “What do you wish teachers would do in the classroom to make you feel welcome?”

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT: WHO ARE WE, AND WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

As a classroom community or a professional learning community, you have created a shared vision for social justice and have begun to unpack what social justice could look like in practice. As a next step, you, as a teacher, need to begin to explore and acknowledge the barriers that may get in the way of creating an environment that is culturally responsive and socially just, including the presence of implicit bias. Begin this process by reflecting on your own identity as well as the intersectional identities of your students. One example of how to foster reflection about bias and identity development was contributed by Dr. Brian Wright.

Brian L. Wright, PhD, is program coordinator and assistant professor of early childhood education at the University of Memphis in Texas. Brian’s research focuses on high-achieving African American boys/males in urban schools, pre-K–12, racial-ethnic identity development of boys and young men of color, African American males as early childhood teachers, and teacher identity development. Brian is the author of *The Brilliance of Black Boys: Cultivating School Success in the Early Grades* (Wright, 2018).

Wright’s “Photo-Cultural-Ecological Self-Study Paper” (PCESSP) is a very effective assignment that promotes identity development and awareness. We encourage you to apply this concept to your individual work as a teacher. We have adapted this prompt to be a brief written reflection, journal entry, composition of a series of social media posts, or rich discussions with your colleagues in a professional learning community. You can learn more about the assignment and the theory and practices that build a foundation in the Implementation Spotlight below.

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

BY BRIAN WRIGHT

Culturally Competent Teachers

Culturally proficient teachers of students of color and those living in poverty have an awareness of the social construction of their identities and those of their students and what those identities represent in broader social contexts. Teachers need to be aware that identity is shaped by cultural experiences and that both the individual and the cultures they represent have an impact on teaching and learning. This becomes especially poignant in the case of white, middle- and upper-class teachers where there is a need for them to recognize what they symbolize: their whiteness, along with the power and privilege it embodies. It is important to note that while student diversity has continued to increase, teacher diversity has not. Some 52% of students are non-white, but some 85% of teachers are white (Kena et al., 2016). Although a teacher may share many cultural aspects with his or her students, including racial and ethnic background, other differences, such as socioeconomic status, can create challenges for teachers. Moreover, matching in terms of race and ethnicity does not equal consciousness. Hence all teachers need to become aware of the many cultures they are a part of as well as the impact of structural inequalities and how these factors might affect their teaching and their students' learning.

Photo-Cultural-Ecological Self-Study Paper

This assignment is grounded in three theoretical frameworks. They include sociocultural theory, bioecological systems theory, and positionality theory. For more information on these theories, please see Appendix A. This assignment broadly conceived aims to sustain and advance the profession of teaching guided by the “affirmation that all students deserve a high-quality educational experience, with a fully prepared teacher in every classroom” (AACTE, 2018, p. 1).

This assignment aims to expose educators to the world critically and their position in it. This focus is primarily because teachers must be “prepared to understand, respect, and address” (AACTE, 2018, p. 3) the unequal distribution of resources that limit access and opportunity for students from historically marginalized populations. Moreover, this assignment is designed to help educators understand and value the legitimacy of cultural heritages as legacies that affect students' dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning as well as their own.

Using This Assignment to Optimize Social Justice and Eliminate Inequities in a Learning Environment

The Photo-Cultural-Ecological Self-Study paper was created as an initial assignment to elicit personal reflections and responses through photographs of cultural artifacts (e.g., rosary beads, rainbow/LGBT pride flag) in order for them to undertake a critical self-study of their own cultural/ethnic identity development. Educators use photographs to illustrate a succinct and compelling narrative that pays explicit attention to multiple identities that have shaped and informed their attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices in and outside of the classroom. Examples of these

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identities include but are not limited to “race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, national origin, language, spiritual beliefs, size [height and/or weight], sexual orientation, social class, economic circumstance, environment, ecology, culture . . .” (Conference on English Education Commission on Social Justice, 2009).

This assignment is important to optimize social justice and eliminate inequities in a learning environment in part because educators must reflect on how issues of access and opportunity are granted or denied on the basis of one or more of their identities. More importantly, this assignment encourages teachers to teach all students more fairly and equitably because they understand every student in their respective classrooms is entitled to the same opportunities for academic achievement regardless of background or unearned privilege.

How to Replicate This Assignment for Your Own Reflection

What follows is an outline of the requirements and expectations for replicating the Photo-Cultural-Ecological Self-Study paper assignment as one way to develop cultural proficiency in teachers. This assignment can be adapted for use with middle and high school students as well. The requirements are as follows:

1. Include a total of five photographs. The first four should be recent photographs, and the final photograph should be an older one (possibility from childhood). The purpose of including an old photograph is to document/describe a sociohistorical moment. All photographs should illustrate participation in various cultural communities.
2. Photographs should reflect and represent some aspect of the author’s culture (e.g., ethnic/racial identity, region of country s/he is from, neighborhood, socioeconomic background, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, lifestyle, past experiences). For example, authors may include photos of food, celebrations, natural places, and images that represent memories. NOTE: Photographs should not include buildings, people, or Internet pictures.
3. Decide whether to document aspects of early childhood, adolescence, and/or adulthood, OR all three.
4. Evidence of critical thinking and examples of learning, unlearning, and relearning should be explicit in the narrative (Wink, 2010). By this I mean educators are encouraged to reflect on critically how the “who” and the “what” they are has contributed to where they are i.e., access and opportunity). Educators are encouraged to reflect on how their access and opportunities might have been limited based on a different set of identities e.g., race, sexual orientation, disability, etc.
5. In a brief paper, journal entry, or series of social media posts, take the reader and/or audience on a “Photo-Cultural-Ecological Self-Study Journey” of their cultural/ethnic identity formation specifically indicating the impact of this introspection in shaping their attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices.
6. Finally, educators are encouraged to share at least one photograph and its significance and what they actually learned, unlearned, and relearned with their peers.

Critical to this assignment is a personal interrogation of your ethos, beliefs, cultural practices, and the impact of American culture/ideologies in terms of race, class, gender, economic, and social divisions that remain in our society. This interrogation should result in consideration

of “temporal experiences”—past, present, and future—of the learner’s narrative toward a deeper introspection of what these revelations may mean for their work with students and families. What follows are quotes taken from papers written by a diverse group of teacher candidates.

Voices of Teacher Candidates

Lisa, Chuck, and Ming-Lee (all names are pseudonyms) come from very different cultural, socio-economic, and linguistic backgrounds. All three share the discomfort, disbelief, and alternative views to ponder as a result of their own reflections on what sociocultural experiences make them the teachers they are. Lisa, a middle-aged white female, undergoes a life-altering experience when she suddenly finds herself outside of the comfort zone of her previously unexamined whiteness.

When My Bubble Burst

Lisa’s examination and reconstruction of her experiences growing up emphasize living a sheltered life and then having to come to terms with all that she had assumed about the opportunity structure that she believed worked the same for all Americans irrespective of race, class, and gender. She explains: “I have lived a sheltered life and a sheltered white life at that. Now at the age of 25 years old, I am being made aware of what the world is really like and being forced to see and acknowledge my whiteness as it represents not only the color of my skin but the language I speak, the biases I will never have to encounter, and the everyday experiences which I take for granted.”

Lisa furthered explains that having to reflect upon her sheltered life became an immense source of anxiety and discomfort whenever she found herself engaged in conversations about race and racism: “It is this sheltered life that I will need to overcome in order to effectively teach students who haven’t lived the same life as me. It is this sheltered life that leaves me feeling helpless when the issues of race come up in a classroom [urban university] setting among students because this is something that was never discussed or acknowledged in my classes [previous rural university].”

On the one hand, Lisa worries about the reality of the effect that having lived a sheltered life might have on her work as a teacher. However, on the other hand, she appears ready to confront her fears: “It is my sheltered life that I need to break away from to benefit not only for myself as a person but for the sake of my students so that the same disservice I feel was done to me is not done to them.”

To Be Black American or Nigerian Is the Question

Chuck’s dilemma comes as a contrast to Lisa’s. A recent college graduate, he quickly learned what it means to self-identify as either black American and/or Nigerian in U.S. society where the identification as black American was considered a negative label. He explained: “As I moved up in the grades, I started identifying less with being black and more with being Nigerian. When you say you’re a Nigerian, people—that is, teachers and administrators—equate that with being an immigrant. And it is perceived by people in this society that immigrants strive for educational advancements. So, identifying more with being Nigerian, a black immigrant, opens up more opportunities in some instances and less in other cases but more importantly set me apart from the less positive classification of

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being a black American. From this experience, I feel it is my duty to introduce my students to the notion of Pan-Africanism to understand the contributions of black Americans within the Diaspora.”

Despite the urgency on Chuck’s part not to be associated with what he had come to understand as negativity with respect to black Americans, he (though not reflected in his quote) learned that whether being black American or Nigerian, his experience with both overt and subtle forms of racism abound, resulting in his desire as a teacher to teach his students about the African Diaspora developing students’ ethnic pride individually and as a group. Moreover, he comes to learn that respectability politics—the idea that if black people alter their behavior to attempt to appease some arbitrary standard of mainstream decorum, their humanity will command more respect—is similar to the myth of meritocracy.

Who Am I?

Ming-Lee, just like Chuck, is in search of her identity as an Asian American of Vietnamese ancestry. She is also a recent college graduate. She explores what it was like as she was in search of her identity: “I went through a time where I wanted to change my name to an ‘American name’ and eat only ‘American food.’ that period lasted for a while until I realized how beautiful my culture was: My language, my family, and my values. These are innately who I was and am—this assignment led me to examine the ways in which society (i.e., Dominant Culture) forces non-white groups to reject their racial/ethnic/cultural identity in order to be a true ‘AMERICAN,’ and I can’t risk this happening to my students.”

The evidence suggests that teachers’ multicultural consciousness may be raised through such an assignment. Specifically, their recognition of the ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, or linguistic divisions that remain in society heightens and leads to their desire to work to transform the culture of schools in order to be effective teachers of students from diverse backgrounds and complex environments.

Conclusion

Research that focuses on race, culture, and positionality emphasizes the contextual nature of class, race, and gender and how these social position variables socially, institutionally, and historically structured opportunities to learn for some, while prohibiting others. Moreover, engaging educators around issues of class, race, and gender plays up the importance for teachers to pay careful attention to their own and others’ racialized and cultural systems of coming to know, knowing, and experiencing the world. In addition to developing racial and cultural consciousness, this assignment aims to help:

- examine and address their own ideological assumptions;
- learn about and examine solutions generated from current research that could assist them in designing curricula and implementing lessons that eliminate or minimize the barriers to learning that exist for students from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds;
- listen astutely and hear the social and academic experiences of their students in order to create, design, and implement curriculum and instruction that both maintains academic rigor and is also culturally responsive; and
- challenge the dominant discourse on class, race, and gender as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups.

Reflection Question

- After learning about the Photo-Cultural-Ecological Self-Study Paper, how can you examine your own ideological assumptions by adapting the paper into your own reflection?

Another way to help to foster identity development is to facilitate deep reflections on our beliefs about teaching our students. UDL requires us to have high expectations for all students, regardless of variability. In *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice*, Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014) share, “Continual improvement, engagement, and growth are available to and expected of everyone” (p. 15).

This technique has been facilitated by Robert Porter. Robert Porter is an educator at an alternative high school. He has worked at all grade levels in the alternative setting for most of his career. In the following Implementation Spotlight, Porter shares a process for having conversations with colleagues about individual and shared belief systems.

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

BY ROBERT PORTER

Rita Pierson, in her TED talk (2013), shared that students don't learn from people they do not like. The mantra in the school district that I work in, is every student, every day, in every class. That means that we as educators must plan for every student, every day in every class.

You may be asking, “Isn't that what we do? Or isn't that our job?” We may believe that in theory, but it doesn't always translate into action. In order for intentionality to take place, educators, like us, must acknowledge and care more about the students than the content. The mantra, as it is on #UDL twitter chats, must be “kids over content.” As educators we must invest time and energy into getting to know our own students in authentic manners and confront our own bias.

As an educator at an alternative school that serves a population that is 100% of students with learning disabilities, this has been the focus of my work. I am continuously wrestling with the question, “What will spark the practice of authentically teaching all students while addressing implicit bias that may affect students?” One practice is inspired by the work of Research for Better Teachers (RBT). It is grounded in the premise that before we can address improving practice, we have to first address what we believe or don't believe about kids and their potential, and name it.

You and your colleagues can begin this work by reflecting on the following questions:

- What do you believe about teaching students at our school?
- What do you believe about the relationships you wish to form with your students?
- What do you believe about students at our school?

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The purpose of these questions is to prompt educators to explicitly express their thoughts about students in writing, then to share these thoughts with colleagues who teach the same group of students. The next step is for the team to discuss the similarities and differences across these responses with each other and to commit to developing a shared system of beliefs. Ideally, colleagues should have an opportunity to discuss what these beliefs look like when lived/enacted in our classrooms (i.e., hidden curriculum).

Other great prompts include:

- How would your students' parents feel if they observed your class?
- What types of feedback would parents offer you to better engage their child?

When we believe in all students, we intentionally design learning that is relevant and authentic. As a classroom teacher, I worked with students who were expelled from other schools. They worked on understanding Pythagoras as a person in order to better understand his theorem. Students worked on the art of public speaking by mastering and owning the words of Emily Dickinson's poem, "I'm Nobody! Who Are You?" After visiting over 100 classrooms in multiple schools in urban and suburban areas, it was evident to me that what makes for a rich learning environment is that the educators must believe that all their students can and will learn and that it's the educators' responsibility to make that happen.

To begin to help colleagues understand their identity, implicit bias, and beliefs about students, it is important that we have the courage to engage them in conversation about these issues and to ask hard questions that challenge beliefs that do not result in teaching that meets the needs of every child, every class, every day. This extends beyond our classrooms and individual practice. We also cannot sit by and wait for administrators to have these conversations or hope that they come up in a professional development or training session. If we really and truly believe in our students, then we need to have the courage to talk to our colleagues about social justice issues and push the boundaries of our collective efficacy.

Additional Resources

- Rita Pierson: https://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion
- Research for Better Teaching: <http://www.rbteach.com/about-rbt>
- Research for Better Teaching: *The Skillful Teacher: The Comprehensive Resource for Improving Teaching and Learning* (7th ed.)
- Developmental Designs: <https://www.originsonline.org/developmental-designs>
- National Center on Time and Learning: <https://timeandlearning.org>

EQUITY AUDIT

After thinking about your own identity, personality, and beliefs, it is critical that you objectively examine what the data says about the experience of marginalized groups in your classroom.

- Which groups have been historically and/or are currently being marginalized in your setting?
- What does it mean to acknowledge that a group has been and/or is currently being marginalized in your setting?
- How do both quantitative and qualitative forms of data support this? How have we, as educators, contributed to this?
- How have our beliefs and actions contributed to this?

There are a number of equity audits that are readily available that you can use for this work. Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center to prevent the growth of hate, recommends the equity audits designed by the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC) (2020). MAEC, in partnership with the Department of Education, developed Criteria for an Equitable School, Criteria for an Equitable Classroom, and Teacher Behaviors that Encourage Student Persistence. These tools are available, in their entirety, at maec.org/resource/equity-audit-materials/.

When looking at the Criteria for an Equitable School, for example, the audit encourages educators to examine school policy, school administration, school climate, staff, assessment/placement, professional learning, and standards and curriculum development by asking targeted reflection questions. These questions will likely lead to research, discussion, and action planning. To share the depth and weight of the questions, imagine addressing the first five questions for curriculum development. If your answer is yes, what data do you have to support your stance? If the answer is no, how will you address the disproportionality?

When examining curriculum development, for example, the first ten questions are as follows:

1. Are all teachers involved in curriculum development to meet standards?
2. Are all students held to the same standards?
3. Are the policy and instructional modifications put in place when students are unable to meet the standards?
4. Does the curriculum utilize print and non-print materials that represent diverse groups?

5. Do recommended textbooks and other instructional materials reflect, as much as possible, the experiences and perspectives of diversity among racial, ethnic, language, religious, and gender groups?
6. Are the teachers' classroom activities and examples multicultural according to race, ethnicity, language, gender, and disability?
7. Does the teacher use classroom lessons to increase awareness and counter the past effects of bias and discrimination?
8. Do the curricula infuse culturally responsive information into instructional approaches and prepare students for a diverse society and workplace?
9. Are people with disabilities shown in the curriculum actively interacting with people both with and without disabilities?
10. Is language used that does not stereotype people or groups?

It is also important to maximize student feedback and capture the experiences of students in your classroom, as optimizing voice and choice is critical in universally designing relevant, authentic, and meaningful learning experiences. Students can improve our teaching. The main reason that we teach is to make a difference for our students. By eliciting feedback from students before we finalize our answers to these questions, we can improve our teaching practices to give our students better opportunities to learn. Because this process helps to highlight inequities across the learning environment, equity audits are a critical step in the process of becoming a more equitable school, as once you identify the problem or barrier, you can begin to eliminate it.

TAKE ACTION AND NEXT STEPS

A socially just and universally designed learning environment is one where all teachers are committed to fostering equity, providing choices, and elevating and celebrating student voices. This can be accomplished by throwing away assumptions and judgments of what an individual's capacity is or should be. Just because folks say that they believe in or are passionate about social justice does not mean that they know what it is or what to do about it. The disconnect between outward social justice beliefs and inward racist and/or deficit-based thinking is a reality that must be addressed through consistent action. Good intentions are not enough; we must focus on impact. Specifically, what are the impacts of our actions, or lack thereof, in and through the lives of the students we serve?

Let's face it head on—one of the most challenging aspects of this work is that it revolves around belief and value systems.

Therefore, we must be bold in naming the fact that the work is not primarily about technical fixes and solutions. If we are truly committed to this work, then we must acknowledge that a lion's share of it lives in the adaptive and not technical domain.

One great example of adaptive change was contributed by Michael S. Martin, EdD, the director of learning for South Burlington School District in Vermont and senior associate with the Rowland Foundation. Martin has written over 100 commentaries for Vermont Public Radio and his doctoral dissertation, *Vermont's Sacred Cow: A Case Study of Local Control of Schools*, examines local school governance as a social construct. He is the author of *Dewey's Ghost* and a chapter in *The Full Vermonty: Vermont in the Age of Trump* (Mares & Danzinger, 2017).

Martin knows what it means to stand for all students. One example was the flying of the Black Lives Matter flag in Montpelier, Vermont. He shares the work of the educators in his district as an example for all of us to reflect on the power of action.

IMPLEMENTATION SPOTLIGHT

BY MICHAEL S. MARTIN

Raising the Black Lives Matter Flag: A Community Takes Action Together

On February 1, 2018, Montpelier High School raised a Black Lives Matter (BLM) flag on its Vermont campus, flying prominently below the flag of the United States. In recent years, many high schools have seen the BLM flag brandished at student protests, but Montpelier is believed to be the first high school to display the flag at the direction of its school board. With its unanimous resolution to raise a BLM flag, the Montpelier School Board issued the following statement, "We echo our students in saying that we make this decision to fly the Black Lives Matter flag with love in our hearts and courage in our voices, and we reject any purported connections to violence or hate. We believe that our students are not motivated by hostility toward others; only by a desire for respect for every student in our community, and the Board shares this desire."

The simplicity of this single, powerful gesture to raise the flag was belied by the extensive work that led up to the event. In fact, student leaders from the Racial Justice Alliance had been in discussions with school administrators and school board commissioners for over a year before the flag-raising. The school board chair, superintendent, and Principal Mike McRaith took the time to work through the ramifications of the decision and to enlist teachers, parents, and the wider community in the initiative. McRaith contacted the local chapter of Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) to explain why a BLM flag deserved a place under the Stars & Stripes. He also sat down with local law enforcement officials, both to let them know that the message was in no way anti-police and also to ask for help with security concerns stemming from the flag.

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The Racial Justice Alliance issued a statement that showed that students understood that the flag was part of a concerted effort to address structural racism in school and society. The students wrote, “Raising this flag is a part of a wider campaign to grow awareness and make changes in our curriculum, climate, and shared understanding of the need for racial justice. Over the past year there have been many steps forward in our community including some direct curricular choices, administrative trainings, faculty in-service, a schoolwide assembly and the Race-Against-Racism. And yet, we need to do more to raise our predominantly white community’s collective consciousness to better recognize white privilege and implicit bias. The Racial Justice Alliance believes putting up a Black Lives Matter flag is imperative for both demonstrating our school’s fight for equitable education for our Black Students and modeling a brave and appropriate challenge to the status quo impeding public institutions across the country.”

The controversy sparked by the BLM Flag was, in fact, an incredible catalyst for learning. There was no shying away from such a bold statement, and each student, teacher, and parent would be asked by their friends and neighbors why the Montpelier community supported taking this step. Montpelier teachers and administrators leaned into the challenge. There were schoolwide screenings of Ava DuVernay’s *13th*, followed by facilitated discussions in advisory groups.

Teacher advisors led Quote of the Day discussions unpacking great ideas from Maya Angelou, Barack Obama, bell hooks, Alice Walker, and Dave Chappelle. Teachers increasingly placed books like *Between the World and Me*, *The New Jim Crow*, and *Waking Up White* at the heart of their curriculum. James Baldwin and Langston Hughes began to get referenced more often, outside of Black History Month. Teacher PLC Leaders underwent training to stop microaggressions, and teachers won grants from the Rowland Foundation and the Vermont NEA to pay for expert facilitators to lead professional development in equity literacy. The Montpelier School Board also pointed out that this work was in line with the district action plan priorities of Equity, Personalization, and Proficiency-Based Learning.

Above all, Principal Mike McRaith learned that this work really teaches empathy. “We need to look past our own personal challenges, struggles, discomforts, and rationalizations, and do the work needed to see and feel the world through the lens of someone besides ourselves. In so doing, we improve our empathy skills, which will hopefully transfer across a wide range of privileges needing empathetic perspectives including but not limited to race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, financial status, education, and citizenship,” McRaith (2018) wrote in a recent blog post. He also pointed out that empathy is one of the Six Facets of Understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011) and that the ability to adopt multiple perspectives is a hallmark of deeper learning. Seen in this light, racial justice work does not detract from the curriculum, but in fact ensures that there is room for students to tackle real-world issues that matter to them, or as one African American student eloquently stated “I want to see myself in the curriculum.”

Finally, the types of discussions that the BLM Flag engendered constituted a step in the direction of a Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1972), where students began to learn how to identify social structures that reproduce injustice in our institutions across generations, school included. “The RJA believes putting up the Black Lives Matter flag is imperative for both demonstrating our school’s fight for equitable education for our Black Students, and modeling a brave and appropriate challenge to the status quo impeding public institutions across the country,” said the student representatives from the Montpelier Racial Justice Alliance.

In the end, persistence and hard work of Montpelier students, with support from their teachers and school leaders, was a simple reminder of our core mission. Our students helped us remember that our work in school needs to focus on helping the historically disadvantaged. Our students asked us to update our curriculum so that it allows them to address the problems facing society today—the ones that matter most to them. Our students brought us back to our school mission that says that *all* Montpelier students will become “able and motivated contributors to their local, national, and global communities.”

In a word, in raising a Black Lives Matter flag, our students reminded us what school is for. They also reminded us that our democracy depends on it.

Next Steps

Challenging your own belief system and asking colleagues to do the same is difficult, and at the same time is both rewarding and necessary. Because when beliefs are challenged, they lead to action. As you begin or continue your journey, consider the following next steps.

- Share your definition of social justice with a colleague, preferably someone who shares the same group of students as you, and ask them to draft one as well.
- Calibrate your definitions. What was similar? What was different? What can you agree on? What can you agree to disagree on?
- Discuss what these definitions look like in action. How will you ensure that you and your colleagues will be held accountable to these “look-fors.” What does it look like to be held accountable? What can students hold you accountable to and how?
- Tell other colleagues and school leaders about what you’re doing, explicitly focusing on the commitments that you are making.

Reflection Questions

- What stage is your community in, in regard to social justice and equity work?
- Have you taken the steps that we have recommended? If not, which steps do you believe will be the most challenging and which will be the most rewarding?

Once you have made a commitment to social justice and have named that commitment for your students, your professional development must continue to revolve around ways to learn, discuss, and reflect on this subject matter. Not for the sake of being a successful practitioner. That is secondary, but first and foremost for the sake of being a human being with the courage and confidence to embrace and not run from the messy space of being authentic about your humanity, imperfection, mistakes, assumptions, and your very imperfect journey. We can’t depend upon external “experts” to help us navigate this space. Ultimately, we must assume responsibility for holding ourselves accountable to the standards of social justice.

In the next chapter, we will share the importance of the collective power of educators to lean into discomfort and take action to deconstruct our systems.

The truth and power of this book is that social justice in our world is literally in our hands as educators. We have the privilege to make changes that allow us to create classrooms and schools that are linguistically appropriate, culturally responsive, socially just, and universally designed. To do this, we have to create communities where we empower all students to embrace their identities, personalize their learning journey through Universal Design, and to create their own pathways to success. For us and our colleagues, we feel a calling to this work. We acknowledge the inequity and privilege in our world and we refuse to stand by and allow them to persist.