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PRACTICE WHAT YOU TEACH

Social Justice Education in the Classroom and the Streets

Bree Picower

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TEACHER ACTIVISM

Social Justice Education as a Strategy for Change

If the United States hopes to maintain any semblance of a public education system, or a democracy for that matter, teacher activism is a critical necessity. The "public" nature of education is rapidly being stripped away by market-based reforms that are pushing an agenda of privatization. Slick marketing campaigns, round-the-clock news stories, and even full-fledged movies such as *Waiting for Superman* depict teachers as lazy and (with their greedy unions) as the cause of public school failure. By turning the hearts and minds of the general public against teachers (and their unions, their pensions, their seniority, etc.), politicians have succeeded in implementing mass teacher lay-offs, to the tune of 40,000 pink-slips nationally in 2010 (Epstein, 2010) and the deterioration of union benefits and bargaining rights in state after state across the country.

By conveniently glossing over the role that poverty, resource distribution, and institutional racism play in educational success, the current so-called "education reformers" are clearing the path for full-blown privatization of public education using the "bad teacher" as their rallying cry. With these fighting words surrounding the context of education, teachers must participate in the struggle to keep education public and to push for greater justice and democracy in the system. Just as we saw in the mobilization of the Occupy Wall Street movement, mass teacher mobilization is required to recalibrate the debate on what schools, students, and communities need.

Across the country, grassroots groups of teachers have emerged to create organizations such as the New York Collective of Radical Educators, Teachers for Social Justice in Chicago, and Teachers 4 Social Justice in San Francisco (Au *et al.*, 2005/2006; Doster, 2008), Teacher Action Group in Philadelphia, Educators Network for Social Justice in Milwaukee, and more. These groups have created a national Teacher Activist Group network (TAG) that is actively working to organize teachers, in coalition with parent, student, and community groups "to work for educational

justice both nationally and in our local communities" (Network of Teacher Activist Groups, 2009). Such groups are rallying around a wide array of issues, such as the rise of market-based school reforms and privatization, the school-to-prison pipeline, nationwide educational budget cuts and lay-offs, the need for culturally relevant curriculum, and more. Teachers uniting and forming mass movements played a significant role in the Wisconsin union uprising of 2011 and has precedents in global struggles such as Oaxaca, Mexico (Denham, 2008). A social movement driven by teachers and teacher-unions is one of the few forces standing up to the attacks that public education is facing in the current context of the United States.

While more and more educators are joining such activist groups to struggle for educational justice, they are still just a small fraction of the teaching force. It is not an understatement to acknowledge that most of the 83% White and predominately middle-class teaching force (US Department of Education, 2008) are not ready to pick up protest signs to start marching in the streets as many of them do not acknowledge the political nature of education. In fact, as a teacher educator, when I ask my pre-service teacher education students why they want to be teachers, the overwhelming response is because they "just love kids." This lack of a broader analysis of the political nature of education points to a huge gap between who teachers currently are in the United States and the vision of teachers as activists fighting to intercede in social injustice.

As a scholar-activist and a teacher educator myself, I see my role as trying to narrow this gap. Working on multiple levels, my teaching and activism centers on preparing and supporting educators who will stand up for equity and justice both inside and outside of the classroom (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2003). One of my main outlets for this work is as a core member of a grassroots teacher activist organization called the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE). NYCoRE is a group of public school educators "who believe that education is an integral part of social change and that we must work both inside and outside the classroom because the struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings" (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2003). NYCoRE works with politically active teachers to respond to local and national educational policies by organizing protests, conferences, and study groups, and creating curriculum and resources for use in classrooms.

In my other role as a teacher educator, my goal has been to prepare teachers to enact the role of teacher activist. Most of my students, however, do not come to the profession predisposed to think about the roles that equity, diversity, and justice have to do with elementary school teaching. Like all teachers who start by meeting their students where they are, I have to engage my students to think about their often unexamined beliefs about who they are and where they come from, and how that impacts the way they see students who are different from themselves. I want my students to begin to question taken-for-granted assumptions about power, privilege, and various forms of oppression and how these impact education and the educational outcomes of their future students. Through my courses, students examine the ways in which they themselves were taught and in what ways this reinforced or transformed the inequalities that they are uncovering.

My students react in a variety of ways to my courses that explore these topics. Some, as one might imagine, react quite defensively and oppose the idea that topics such as race and homophobia have a place in their teacher preparation program. These students wholeheartedly hang on to mainstream ideologies about students of Color and urban communities, using many discursive tools that block a critical analysis of inequality, particularly around racism. Without this political analysis, the gap between their desire to maintain the status quo and the goal of teaching from a social justice perspective is unlikely to close. Much of my teaching centers around helping these students recognize that inequality in fact does exist, and that mechanisms such as racism, patriarchy, and neoliberalism maintain it. Fortunately, other students say that the course content is inspiring and they become highly motivated to develop curriculum from their emerging understandings of social justice.

It was quickly apparent that one or two semesters of critically oriented coursework was insufficient to support my graduates to become social justice educators. To address this, I started a Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project (CIP) with former students of mine who wanted support from this perspective in their first years of teaching. My initial thinking was that CIP could serve to "incubate" these teachers while they got their first year or two of teaching under their belts, and that by then they would be ready to join groups such as NYCoRE. Unfortunately this was not the case. While the CIP teachers did develop powerful curricular units on social justice topics such as racism, child labor, and gender roles to name a few, the teachers did not seem to move their work outside of their classrooms as activists.

Treating each of these groups of educators that I work with, 1) oppositional pre-service teachers, 2) emerging social justice educators, and 3) developed teacher activists as separate groups, I have done research with and written several articles about each distinct group over the last several years. As I started to explore why the CIP teachers were not developing into teacher activists in the way I had anticipated, I started to think more about the connections between each of these groups of teachers and what shapes the development of increasingly critical and active educators over time. This book is an attempt to look closely at this continuum from opposition to action, examining the obstacles and the pathways toward teacher activism, and the role that teacher education and professional development can play in expanding social justice education from the classroom to the streets.

Social Justice Education: What Is It?

In the last decade, the term and concept of "social justice" in education has both come into vogue and come under fire (Labaree, 2004; Stern, 2006). Rather than allowing this term to be abandoned or co-opted, it is critical for those of us who see education as a vehicle for liberation to be clear about what we mean when we say

social justice education (SJE). SJE necessitates the ability for educators to engage on three levels. The first is for teachers to have a recognition and political analysis of injustice and how it operates to create and maintain oppression on multiple levels. The second is teachers' willingness and ability to integrate this analysis into academic teaching in the classrooms. The third is that teachers must have the mindsets and skillsets to expand their social justice work outside the classroom as activists, with students and on their own, to combat multiple forms of oppression.

While SJE is a distinct field, the term "social justice education" is often referred to as an "umbrella term" (Spalding, *et al.*, 2010; Agarwal, *et al.*, 2010; North, 2008) because there are many ways to center on issues of equity, access, power, and oppression. In fact, when scholars are invoking social justice education to redress these issues, they may just as often be adopting terminology, examples, or lessons from other fields such as critical pedagogy, culturally relevant, multicultural, anti-oppressive, anti-racist education as well as queer, woman, and disabilities studies, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy.

It is this inter-disciplinary nature of centering on issues of equity, access, power, and oppression that makes teaching itself, and teaching from a social justice perspective, a political act situated in cultural, racial, economic, political tensions (Freire, 1998; Montano, *et al.*, 2002; McLaren, 2003; Cochran-Smith, *et al.*, 2009; Schultz, 2008). As Cochran-Smith, *et al.* (2009) explain, "teaching for social justice [is] an activity with political dimensions in which all educators are responsible for challenging inequities in the social order and working with others to establish a more just society" (p. 352). In order to teach for social justice, educators must be able to recognize the highly political educational context that masquerades as neutral (Kumashiro, 2008; hooks, 1994; Zeichner, 1993), allowing reforms to act as gate-keepers for low-income students of Color in the name of meritocracy and common sense (Hursh, 2007; Kumashiro, 2008). In other words, educators themselves must have a political analysis of how inequality, oppression, and power operate as a starting place for social justice teaching.

The role of the teacher, therefore, is to contribute to the broader political project of identifying and eliminating oppression (Katsarou, *et al.*, 2010) in order to work toward a more democratic society (Lipman, 2004; Freire, 1970; McDonald, 2007). Social justice educators are aware of social inequality and see themselves as responsible for playing a role in diminishing disparities within schools and the larger society (Cochran-Smith, *et al.*, 2009; Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe, 2005; Schey & Uppstrom, 2009). Montano, *et al.* (2002) claim, "For critical educators, the concept of social justice is a foundation upon which to disrupt and change unjust, unequal, and undemocratic political institutions" (p. 266). They remind us that teachers must move beyond the surface interpretation of social justice in education as "community service days" or penny drives, and actively connect the concerns of students and their communities to the larger constructs of oppression in the form of racism, classism, gender subjugation, homophobia, ageism, and ableism (Katsarou, *et al.*, 2010).

Struggling for Justice Both Inside and Outside of the Classroom (NYCoRE, 2003)

Because social justice educators are concerned with changing broader systems of oppression, they must be ready, willing, and able to work both inside and outside of their classrooms for social change. The work inside the classroom involves developing caring and respectful student relationships and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy that prepares students to create change. Outside of their classrooms, teachers must themselves take action to challenge oppressive systems that create educational and societal inequality (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2003). Cochran-Smith, *et al.* (2009) provide a definition that addresses this dual nature of SJE: "Teaching for social justice is defined ... by ensuring that all students have rich learning opportunities and challenging aspects of the system that reinforce inequities" (p. 374). To be fully realized social justice educators, teachers must be equally concerned with these dual goals if they hope to both educate their students and create actual change.

Inside the Classroom: Social Justice Pedagogy and Curriculum

Within the classroom domain, social justice educators challenge inequality through particular approaches that include 1) the relationships they develop with students, 2) the democratic classrooms they create, and 3) the specific ways in which they are then able to teach students to analyze and challenge oppression.

Social justice educators understand that developing caring relationships (Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999) with students based on a critical understanding of who students are and where they come from can lead to greater student academic success and leadership development (Cammarota & Romero, 2008). Therefore, social justice teachers take the time to get to know students' life circumstances (Tan, 2008) and the "broader social and economic forces that make learning difficult" (Cammarota & Romero, 2008, p. 467). This allows teachers to understand the challenges students face based on oppressive conditions these students may be experiencing, rather than rely on deficit notions of students' capacities. As North (2008) points out, social justice teachers "develop respect for individuals' differences and recognize how those differences might be informed by individuals' affiliations with particular social groups, such as those based on race, ethnicity, or class" (p. 422).

While these teachers understand the challenges students face in an unjust society, because they care about their students' success, they maintain high standards and don't allow these challenges to become excuses to teach less or to lower their expectations of students' capacities (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ayers, 2008). Rather than see these issues as something beyond their control, social justice educators feel a responsibility to address these issues in solidarity with their students (Mikel & Hiserman, 2000) and use this knowledge as a basis for co-constructing curriculum and social action (Camangian, 2010; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Cochran-Smith,

2004). Social justice educators use students' home cultures to support academic success and to develop socio-cultural consciousness (Lipman, 2004; Schultz, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Camangian, 2010). Such teachers "draw on the talents and strengths that students bring to school (Nieto & Bode, 2008). This leads to greater trust, which ultimately allows for greater opportunities for students to take leadership for liberation (Cammarota & Romero, 2008).

Inside the classroom, these trusting relationships lay the foundation for democratic environments based on care, respect, and liberation that characterizes the classrooms of social justice educators. Such classrooms diminish traditional hierarchies between teacher and student, between those who have something to learn and those who have something to teach (Freire, 1970; Cammarota & Romero, 2008). Social justice educators reject the banking model of education, which posits students as empty vessels waiting to be filled (Freire, 1970). Instead, such educators co-create transformative classroom communities where everyone feels the responsibility to contribute (hooks, 1994) and students take an active role in their own education (Hackman, 2005).

These democratic classrooms provide the setting in which educators engage students in developing analyses of oppression in a manner that is culturally relevant and action oriented. To do this successfully, first and foremost, social justice educators must have deep content knowledge and competence (Montano, *et al.*, 2002) in order to help young people develop the academic literacy skills they need to navigate professional and civic life. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) explain:

> If these students are going to wear the mantle of the struggle for social and educational justice, if they are going to produce knowledge that forces us to look at our worlds differently, and if they are going to motivate people to act as collectives for social change, they will need to be able to read, write, and speak at high levels. (p. 129)

Duncan-Andrade and Morrell link academics to the struggle for justice and view academic skill development and content mastery as key components of social justice education and critical pedagogy. Hackman (2005) also describes three kinds of content mastery that social justice educators must possess: factual information, historical contextualization, and macro-to-micro content analysis. Without these areas of knowledge, Hackman (2005) suggests, educators will be unable to provide students with the necessary information and context to develop the skills described by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008).

This content mastery across multiple disciplines is the foundation teachers use to teach the main theme of social justice education, which is to support students in developing political analyses of how oppression and inequality operate (Lipman, 2004). Moving away from a celebration of diversity and a focus on individuals, SJE concentrates on systems of oppression, power, and privilege, and the processes that perpetuate inequality (Hackman, 2005; Picower, 2011). SJE makes explicit parts of the curriculum that are often left hidden: "the inequities of society and institutional structures in which they are embedded" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 78). By bringing to the surface the knowledge and history of people who have been marginalized and oppressed (McLaren, 2003; King, 2008), students are better able to understand how current conditions have been shaped by struggles for power. This provides them with a political analysis to better understand their own situations and how historical forces have shaped their lives. With these understandings, students are in a better position to act on injustice because they understand root causes of inequality and how they are perpetuated.

In addition to teaching the root causes of inequality and how they affect students' material conditions, SJE emphasizes teaching about social movements and the processes by which liberating change has happened (Hackman, 2005; Leistyna, 2008). This knowledge is shared so that, rather than feeling disempowered upon learning about systems of oppression (Hackman, 2005), students instead have the opportunity to understand that change is possible, and that ordinary people working in coalition have had powerful results. This lays the foundation for teachers and students to move outside the classroom to take action for social change themselves because they have role models of others who have done so (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Tan, 2008).

All of the work in the classroom, the relationships, democratic practices, and focus on redressing inequality, ultimately serves one purpose: providing students with the tools they need to take action for justice. As Westheimer and Suurtamm (2008) argue, the purpose of SJE is "to equip students with the knowledge, behavior, and skills needed to transform society into a place where social justice can exist" (p. 590). However, some of the literature that describes SJE stops short before explicating the role of actual action, promoting instead student skills and dispositions such as critical thinking, reflecting on their communities, developing agency, and the ability to act (Nieto & Bode, 2008). The development of these skills is critical, but to what end? The ultimate goal of SJE within the domain of the classroom is to allow students to apply their academic knowledge and skills to work toward changing social inequality and oppressive institutions (Westheimer & Kahne, 2007; Dixson & Smith, 2010), in order to "[transcend] and [transform] the struggles they experience in their everyday lives" (Camangian, 2008, p. 498). The goal is for students to move away from passivism and to become activists with the power to create change (Ayers, *et al.*, 2008; Christensen, 2009; Freire, 1970; Tan, 2008).

This inside the classroom section describes the work that social justice teachers do in terms of curriculum and instruction, and is often the first step on the road to becoming a fully realized social justice educator. Teacher education and professional development programs tend to provide some level of support for this inside the classroom work, focusing more on multicultural and culturally relevant curriculum development (Kailin, 2002; McDonald & Zeichner, 2008). However, SJE is incomplete without both teachers and students engaging in further action for change outside of the classroom because, as argued by the teacher activist group, NYCoRE (2001), "the struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings."

Outside of the Classroom: Teacher Activism and Collective Organizing

All of the work that happens inside of the classroom is important and needs to take place in order to provide students with the knowledge and skills to create change. However, if SJE remains relegated to the classroom, there is little hope for a more just society to be realized. If educators continue to work as individuals within their classrooms, creating small democratic environments for a few students, they will never reach the ultimate goals of SJE because they will never impact the root causes of inequality.

Well-intentioned teachers who focus only on social justice curriculum and pedagogy are unable to reach larger goals of a more equitable society because they and their students will not actualize change. Racism, classism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression may replicate themselves in the classroom but they did not start there. If no action is taken outside of the classroom, then the structures that perpetuate inequality are left untouched. Like a CD stuck on repeat, teachers who do not advocate for and engage in activism will have to reteach their lessons on inequality annually—however powerful and engaging—if they do not join any movements or contribute to actions that reshape the oppression they teach their students about.

Fully realized social justice educators have a responsibility to move beyond the inside the classroom role to engage in the second component of SJE, taking action to struggle for educational and broader justice (New York Collective of Radical Educators, 2003). This movement outside of the classroom expands the role from teacher to teacher activist. Recognizing that classrooms are reflections of broader societal injustice (Mikel & Hiserman, 2000), teacher activists step outside of the classroom to work for transformational change (Giroux, 1988; Kincheloe, 2005; McLaren, 2003). Such teachers not only teach about social issues and develop their students as activists, they also take on the role of activist directly. Montano, *et al.* (2002) rightly explain, "For these teachers, simply being a 'good' (that is, a social justice) teacher within the four walls of their own classrooms was not enough" (p. 272). Without enacting their own teacher activism, these teachers aren't creating social change. "A teacher activist criticizes those who are social justice teachers in thought only—who believe in the central tenets of critical pedagogy but who do not enact them in their own teaching and who are not active in social movements" (Montano, *et al.*, 2002, p. 266). Remaining within the safety or convenience of their classrooms, teachers leave SJE half done.

Teacher activists are of course interested in social justice pedagogy, but they are equally concerned with transforming both their schools and broader communities, and they engage in action in several ways: taking action alongside their students, challenging school and educational inequality, collaborating with parents and communities, and joining activist movements to take collective action. As Montano, *et al.* (2002) explain, a teacher activist, or organizer, is a fully realized social justice educator only when they begin walking the walk that they are promoting in their classroom:

"It is only through engagement in the practical and theoretical tasks of political activism that teacher activists begin to instantiate and make sense of their social justice philosophies and agendas" (p. 266). By expanding their actions beyond teaching about social issues to taking social action to transform injustice, social justice educators become teacher activists working to effect change rather than only teach about it.

The first dimension of teacher activism, working with students, has been touched upon in the discussion of what teachers can do within their classrooms. It is mentioned again here because this collaborative engagement blurs the line between what happens within and outside of classrooms. In this case, it refers to going beyond relying on students to take action by giving them social justice assignments such as writing letters or petitions. As a teacher activist, the role switch requires teachers to be "struggling alongside their students against oppressive conditions, both inside their classrooms and beyond the confines of the school in which they teach" (Montano, *et al.*, 2002, p. 266). True social justice projects, as Cerecer, *et al.*, (2010) remind us, cannot be single curricular activities, but rather "[need] to include students and adults, as well as the school-wide and local community" (p. 157). Rather than seeing their role as teachers who are supporting students to do social justice work, teacher activists roll up their sleeves and get to work alongside students, because they see themselves as equal partners struggling together toward the same outcome.

Working explicitly on issues of educational justice is another way in which teachers move beyond their classroom door to increase educational opportunities for their students (Kapustka, *et al.*, 2009; Cochran-Smith, *et al.*, 2009; Chubbuck, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2007). From fighting oppressive policies such as high-stakes testing, school funding, and undemocratic educational structures, social justice teachers concern themselves with both school site issues and broader local and national educational issues that impact academic opportunity and equity. Often starting with school-based committee involvement, teacher activists routinely expand this dimension of outside of the classroom justice work to broader educational organizing.

Whether working on issues of educational equity or broader social justice issues, such as political economic conditions that maintain inequality like housing costs, gentrification, and minimum-wage policies (Anyon, 2005), such teachers work in collaboration with other educators, students, their families, and communities (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Bigelow, *et al.*, 1994). Teacher activists have two important understandings about change: 1) isolated teachers acting alone cannot put sufficient pressure on systems to create change and 2) the process of how change is brought about is equally important to the product, therefore change best happens in a democratic way, in which all stakeholders—including parents, students, and community members—have a voice in the outcome. This understanding of shared democratic change motivates teacher activists to engage in the often difficult and politically nuanced work of building coalitions with parent, youth, community, and union groups working toward similar goals.

Since isolated teachers acting alone cannot have enough impact, another distinction of fully developed teacher activism is that action is taken collectively rather than individually. In contrast, often when teachers attempt to engage in social change, they typically do so as individual teachers. Marshall and Anderson (2009) interviewed 52 activist educators to learn about their work and found that the teachers in their study often acted behind the scenes as individuals. These activist educators were not part of larger networks or movements with other like-minded educators and Marshall and Anderson (2009) suggested that they might benefit from such a community. Carlson (1987) critiqued the "individual" nature of teachers who do become political actors, and quotes Jean Anyon to point out that, "[w]hile accommodation and resistance as modes of daily activity provide ... ways of negotiating individually felt social conflict or oppression, this individual activity of everyday life remains just that: individual, fragmented, and isolated from group effort. It is thus politically weakened" (as cited in Carlson, 1987, p. 295).

To strengthen the impact of teacher activism, social justice educators need to be politically engaged in sustained and collective ways. As Montano, *et al.* (2002) argue, "many social justice educators are, in fact, teacher activists in political and social movements working to bring about changes in educational policies that they perceive to be unjust" (p. 265). Many such teachers have been creating and finding homes in grassroots teacher activist groups that have been organizing themselves in cities across the United States (Network of Teacher Activist Groups, n.d.). These groups of teachers situate their work in relation to broader social justice movements and unabashedly embrace the political nature of teaching and education, working collectively to promote the broader involvement of teachers in urban public school systems by engaging in activities ranging from anti-war activism to social justice curriculum writing. These teachers have embraced both tenets of social justice education by working both inside and outside of their classrooms. They help students develop political analyses and activist opportunities while also working outside of the classroom to create impactful change on oppressive institutions.

Sequence of the Book

As laid out in the definition of SJE and teacher activism, I argue that to actualize liberatory change, social justice educators must work both inside and outside of the classroom. Most teachers, however, do not enter the field with this vision of their role. As most teacher educators with a social justice lens can attest to, many teachers enter the field with little to no recognition that social inequality exists, and therefore they are not motivated to work to change a system that they see as functioning equitably. This book addresses barriers to the development of teacher activism by identifying ideologies such as this that many teachers hold about both injustice and activism, and the tools they use to subvert, discredit, and avoid challenges to their understandings about oppression and social change. Based on original research on three different groups of teachers—1) pre-service teachers actively opposed to social justice, 2) emerging social justice educators, and 3) experienced teacher activists—this book traces a continuum of development toward activism as teachers overcome the barriers and roadblocks along the way. By understanding these barriers, pre-service and in-service teachers along with teacher educators will be in a better position to develop the kind of political analysis that lays the foundation for teacher activism.

This first chapter set up the definition of what social justice education is. Because the term has been used many different ways and risks co-optation, it is important that I clarify the way it is referred to in this book. The remainder of the book looks in detail at the challenges of moving teachers at various stages of political consciousness to enact the vision of teaching laid out in this chapter that includes working both inside and outside of the classroom.

One of the first barriers to SJE is the disconnect between the life experiences of the teaching force, primarily White, middle-class women, and the students whom they teach. Chapter 2, "'Why Do We Have to Talk about Race Again?': Oppositional Stances and Tools of Whiteness," focuses on original research with White pre-service teachers. It demonstrates how their life experiences influence them to have problematic assumptions about students of Color, urban schools, and communities. Because these teachers believe the United States is already relatively equitable and that Whites are the real victims of racism, they see no need to become educators who would change the conditions that are already working for them. This way of seeing the world limits their ability to become social justice educators because they do not have the foundation needed: the political analysis to recognize inequality and the desire to act upon it. This chapter examines such oppositional pre-service teachers' responses to challenges to their problematic assumptions and discusses how these responses are much more threatening than simple resistance or isolated comments. The chapter also provides some strategies for teacher educators and professional developers to consider using to interrupt these assumptions.

Fortunately, not all teachers come to the profession with this level of resistance to developing a framework of justice. Chapter 3, "Teaching for Justice: Developing Strategies for Integrating SJE in the Classroom," examines original research with a second set of teachers: emerging educators who volunteered to participate in a social justice critical inquiry project (CIP). Unlike the teachers in Chapter 2, these teachers began to recognize inequality and sought avenues to teach about it. They developed strategies to integrate their developing political analysis into their classroom teaching. By using these strategies, the teachers were successful in creating classrooms where students learned about social issues, even in settings that were not supportive of this stance. However, the teachers struggled to take the next step of moving outside of their classroom as teacher activists because their strategies were limited to their classrooms, leaving larger issues of social injustice untouched.

Chapter 4, "Stuck at the Classroom Door: Falling Back on Tools of Inaction," continues the journey with the CIP teachers as they gained a few more years of

experience. The next logical step in the CIP members' development as social justice educators would have been to start to directly address issues of inequality by moving outside of the classroom door to engage their students in social action and to develop as activists themselves. However, this proved difficult. This chapter, based on data from the third year of CIP, examined what happened as these teachers began to realize the enormity of the challenge of moving outside of their classroom to create social change. These teachers had two choices: 1) to embrace the difficulty of the challenge and dedicate themselves to growing both as teachers and activists, or 2) to retreat back to the comfort of the classroom. In an attempt to not feel like failures in their journey, the teachers instead used what I call "Tools of Inaction" to try to relieve the tension they felt by not taking their next steps. Explored in detail, these tools served to postpone, justify, or redirect the responsibility of becoming active in struggling for sustainable social change as teacher activists.

In contrast to the CIP teachers who used the Tools of Inaction to diminish the discomfort of complacency, Chapter 5, "Reconciling the Vision: Taking Action for Educational Justice," looks at teachers who work to reconcile their vision of social justice and the reality of public schooling in the United States. The findings in this chapter are based on a national study of teacher activists who actively work in collective social justice teacher groups. These teachers understand that education functions in two ways, as both a space for potential liberation and as force of injustice that reproduces and reinforces existing social inequality. These teachers worked to address both of these functions. To create liberating spaces, they taught students to develop a critical analysis of their world and provided them with opportunities to take action. To battle against oppression, the teacher activists organized collectively to stand up to injustice and to get teachers' voices into policy arenas. This chapter highlights two concrete examples of teachers enacting this vision in Tucson, Arizona, in the battle for ethnic studies and in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where teachers struggled for workers' rights.

The final chapter, Chapter 6: "'Making a Difference': Teaching in the Classroom and Organizing in the Streets," argues that for teachers to realize their expressed desire to "make a difference" in their students' lives, they must take action both inside and outside of the classroom. The journey toward teacher activism may not be linear, but it does require being able to understand inequality, social change, and social justice in particular ways. This chapter further explores these steps toward activism and why teacher organizing is critically important in our current historical context.

My Path

In many ways, my own journey as a social justice educator and teacher activist mirrors the flow of this book. The book looks at a continuum of social justice development moving from teachers who hold mainstream ideologies about race to teachers who are motivated to teach about social justice and then on to activist

teachers who actively seek opportunities to create change. Unwittingly, this is very much the progression I went through myself as I developed as a social justice educator.

Like the teachers in Chapter 2, growing up as a White girl in more privileged settings, I certainly was not immune from being socialized to have particular understandings of race and difference. However, I feel that a variety of life experiences, or "critical race moments," mitigated the impact of this socialization, which in turn motivated me to seek out different opportunities that put me on a path toward social justice activism. I share some of these below, not to paint a portrait of myself as a "White exception," but to show that particular experiences have the potential to interrupt the internalization of hegemonic understandings. Attempting to recognize and replicate similar mitigating factors has shaped the way I prepare teachers, and has led me to provide my students with opportunities to wrestle with similar experiences.

One prerequisite to teaching for social justice is recognizing that racism exists and that it benefits White people. As shown in Chapter 2, many White teachers do not recognize this to be the case. What, unfortunately, helped me to see that racism exists was the differential treatment between myself and my childhood best friend, Jasmine, a Puerto Rican student who was one of the few students of Color at our predominately White private school. Jasmine, a math wiz, basically carried me through elementary school mathematics. When we entered middle school and our school started ability tracking, I was placed in Math B, and Jasmine, surprisingly, was placed in Math C. Her parents fought the school administration, who told them it was for her own good. Because of her parents' continued resistance, though, the school eventually placed Jasmine in Math B, where they kept her for another year until she was rightfully promoted to Math A. Jasmine's math misplacement is but one example of the school and teachers treating Jasmine in ways that I wasn't treated. Because Jasmine was my "bff," I naturally had empathy for her and anger about the situation that changed the way I saw seemingly "neutral" educational decisions.

Another key factor in being an ally in the struggle for justice is recognizing that, as a White person, you don't have all the answers and that it is necessary to listen to communities of Color about what is needed. This was a more difficult understanding for me to gain because of the way my school and surroundings structured experiences that placed me in the "savior" role. Because of the situations with Jasmine, I recognized inequality and was motivated to do something about it. I was active in the school's social service program and participated in many activities such as tutoring in homeless shelters in East Harlem and the Lower East Side, neighborhoods the school considered "dangerous." The programs I volunteered in were run by White adults who insisted on calling cabs for me when I would leave in the evening. This didn't make me feel safe; rather, it made me feel extremely embarrassed, and I knew there was something wrong with the fact that I was being shuttled out of a place where the 8-year-olds I was tutoring had to stay.

At the time, I didn't have the words or theoretical understanding of why I felt this way or why this was problematic: I simply felt uncomfortable. These experiences

were meant to reinforce the problematic assumptions that people of Color are in need of help and that "nice, White girls" like myself were considered to be in the position to "help," even though I wasn't really bringing any special training to the table. Even though I was positioned in this way, unlike the women profiled in Chapter 2, I was able to resist this role to a degree because of this unnamable discomfort that led me to make different choices in the future.

At the same time, motivated by romantic notions of the "sixties," I started to dip my toes in some of the activism happening in New York City in the late 1980s. Somehow I ended up at a local socialist organization meeting (don't ask me how, I have no idea), and started going to protests in front of Shell, Mobil, and Exxon to get them to divest from South Africa. I marched with César Chávez to get "poison grapes" out of local grocery stores—although I had no idea who he was at the time other than a "nice man who came all the way from California to march with us!" At the time, I saw myself as a social justice activist—I was showing up and yelling and marching. In retrospect, however, I really didn't know what I was doing because I didn't have a fully formed political analysis of how inequality operated.

It wasn't until I took classes as an undergraduate that gave me a framework to understand oppression that I would really be able to move out of this period of an outward "performance" of social justice activism that will be further discussed in Chapter 4. While my activism at this stage was incomplete, these early experiences did instill in me the understanding that if you don't like something that is happening in the world, you can do something about it. This is an important motivator for taking action toward social justice.

After high school, I was an undergraduate in the early 1990s in Ann Arbor, Michigan, during a time when the United States was going through a series of racially charged events. I wanted to continue to work with children, but, motivated by my discomfort with the settings I worked at in high school, I sought a program that had leadership of Color rather than "well-intentioned" White adults. I ended up at the Peace Neighborhood Center, a community center that served the residents of the city's low-income housing communities, and this served as probably the most significant period of development of my racial consciousness. These housing communities were literally hidden from most of Ann Arbor, built around the outskirts of the city and off of all the main roads—most people on campus had no idea they existed. I was one of the only people who wasn't either African American or raised in the community that worked there. My co-workers and I weren't colorblind to the differences; we recognized and joked around about them, making it a setting in which I felt at ease and welcomed. Fortunately, this experience extinguished any remnant of the "savior" role I carried because it was clear that the leadership had more of the "answers" than I ever could have brought, and they were generous in training me to be successful in working with the young people at the center.

Being at the Peace Neighborhood Center during this time period allowed me to reshape my racial lens because I was exposed to the unfiltered views of my co-workers on racially charged topics. For instance, before the students came for the afterschool program that I co-directed, the staff and adults whose needs were being met by the center would hang around in the main room and watch TV. Because this was the early 1990s, day in and day out we were glued to the TV news, first watching the Rodney King incident, and subsequent LA uprising, then tuning in to and analyzing the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill hearings. Finally, we watched the speeding white Bronco and the daily developments of the O.J. trial. Being a part of the discussions and listening to the uncensored reactions of the Black people around me was just part of my daily life, and their reactions became part of my own perspective. Having opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with people of Color, hearing and learning from their perspectives on issues of race, feeling comfortable participating in racially charged discussions, and working in an environment that was run by members of the community being served all played a significant role in shaping my political analysis. As will be seen in Chapter 2, many White people either do not have, or actively avoid, settings in which they will be the minority, and therefore do not have the experiences in which they can build similar understandings.

After a move to California and several other working experiences that explicitly focused on race, equality, and education, I decided to become a classroom teacher. As luck would have it, the Oakland Unified School District placed me at Prescott Elementary, the school that had gained national attention by being the "Ebonics school." Race was always on the table, and much of the professional development provided focused on learning more about African American culture and making connections to the classroom. Because of my prior experiences, I was used to being around Black people talking about racism, and, unlike some of the other White teachers at the school, I embraced the culturally focused professional development opportunities. The veteran Black teachers led by Carrie Secret trained me how to integrate both issues of culture and the social issues that I was already passionate about into the classroom curriculum. At this point in my life, my teaching was similar to the teachers in Chapter 3 as I was learning the concrete skills of being a social justice educator inside of the classroom. While I was still somewhat active in broader issues of equity and educational policy, it took a back seat while I learned how to create culturally relevant and social justice curriculum.

When I moved back to New York and was working on my dissertation, I was introduced to NYCoRE, and it was by joining this group that I was able to pull together my inside and outside of the classroom work. Granted, by this time, my "classroom" was at the university level, preparing people to be elementary school teachers. Like the teacher activists in Chapter 5, becoming active in a group setting provided me with a place to integrate my desire to prepare people to create liberatory classroom environments while also taking action to change conditions and policies that were increasing inequality. Having a supportive space of like-minded, committed educators who shared my passion for educational justice has both strengthened and pushed my work and my sense of efficacy. This journey of development and constant learning continues to unfold for myself and the teachers profiled in this book.

While there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between my experiences and other people's journeys toward social justice activism, it is clear that there are stages that people go through where they gain the mindsets and skillsets that are needed for fully realized teacher activism: awareness, empathy, analysis, and action. The heart of this book is to help teachers recognize where they are in this continuum and to provide them with some insights into how to continue to move forward. For me, being a teacher activist shapes the way I see and interact with the world in a way that makes me feel hopeful instead of hopeless. As activist and poet Staceyann Chin says, "Every day I get better at knowing that it is not a choice to be an activist; rather, it is the only way to hold on to the better parts of my human self. It is the only way I can live and laugh without guilt" (Goodreads, n.d.). My hope with this book is that it can support educators toward teacher activism so that they can teach "without guilt," knowing that they are doing their part to ameliorate the injustices that unequal education reproduces.

2

"WHY DO WE HAVE TO TALK ABOUT RACE AGAIN?"

Oppositional Stances and Tools of Whiteness

Teacher activism necessitates the ability for educators to engage on three levels that they may not be predisposed to think about. The first is having a recognition and political analysis of injustice and how it operates to create and maintain oppression on multiple levels. The second is the willingness and ability to integrate this analysis into academic teaching in the classrooms. The third is to have the mindset and skillset to expand their social justice work outside the classroom, with students and on their own, to stand up to oppression. This chapter explores the implications of the "unexamined Whiteness of teaching" (Picower, 2007) and its impact on teachers' ability and willingness to engage on these three levels. Tracing teachers' identities and life experiences, and the impact they have on their understanding of people different than themselves, this chapter demonstrates how the socialization of some White teachers blocks their ability to recognize inequality, let alone teach or take action to combat it—which is the foundation of social justice education (SJE). By using "Tools of Whiteness" designed to protect their previously socialized understandings, the teachers in this chapter maintain their racist ideology, ensuring their inability to move toward teacher activism.

This chapter examines research done with a group of pre-service female teachers in their twenties who were graduate students of mine in a course on multicultural education for elementary classrooms. The course, collaboratively designed with a colleague, was intended to help teachers begin exploring their own racial identity and class privilege, their assumptions about students of Color and the communities that they come from, and their developing understandings of the role of the teacher in urban schools. Students went through a process of reflecting on their life experiences and the ways in which those experiences influenced their role as future teachers.

Due to a variety of unusual scheduling dilemmas, this particular semester, I only had ten students enrolled in the course, and all of them were White. This presented