

Social Justice Perspectives

From the Social Justice Perspectives Editor

This issue of *JISS* initiates a new column on social justice. The column addresses concepts, principles, and perspectives of social justice as they relate to the purposes of social studies. The contexts may be global or national, and may focus on particular social groups, and/or discuss substantive issues and current events. The column explores reasons why social justice is vital to social education, and draws implications for educators as they take on the mission of social justice education in the world. It will include theory and research with implications for practice. This initial essay introduces the topic of social justice and suggests some ideas for the integration of social justice into the social studies curriculum.

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Challenging Ourselves to Take Social Justice Education Seriously

Social justice education can be the vehicle to transform the existing curriculum into a dynamic, meaningful, and substantive study, and global citizens who willingly take on the work of justice in the world show us how to translate that learning into our lives.

Stories of the extraordinary lives of ordinary citizens, their greatness and humility, can inspire us to live for a higher purpose. During the civil rights movement in the U.S. for example, many otherwise ordinary citizens became heroes—the Freedom Riders, the Little Rock Nine, the Greensboro Eight, and others. This non-violent movement, inspired by the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, forever changed the lives of Americans. Its heroes give citizenship new meaning, and their sacrifices call us to a greater involvement in struggles for national and global human and civil rights.

The history of social movements and the views and experiences of the diverse population of the U.S. are either excluded or not fully developed in U.S. social studies textbooks and typically, the social studies curriculum (Alter, in press;

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Southern Poverty Law Center/Teaching Tolerance, 2011; Zimmerman, 2011). Thus, teachers and leaders in social education concerned with social justice should integrate the study of social movements, critical historical events, and diverse perspectives, and encourage students to become engaged in the ongoing struggles for equality in the U.S. and around the world.

The work of Howard Zinn provides a people's history that addresses social movements and calls attention to what is left out of traditional American history (Zinn, 1995) (see also <http://zinnedproject.org/>). A people's history reveals that stories of traditional heroes often reflect nationalistic and militaristic perspectives and a limited and often distorted (stereotyped) sense of diverse social groups and their role in history. Zinn's work challenges educators to fill in the blanks, to find what is missing in our histories and why, and to teach the much more complicated stories of our past.

Historical narratives of primarily stock stories (traditional history supporting the white racial status quo) can be expanded to include concealed stories (alternative stories about racism known by marginalized groups and white anti-racists), resistance stories (acknowledgement of and explanations for continued resistance to the ongoing racist policies and practices of dominant groups/institutions/nations), and transformative stories (those which oppose stock stories and combine concealed and resistance stories into new narratives for social justice education) (Bell, 2010). This content raises questions about historical facts, multiple perspectives, underlying motivations/causes and effects of events, and the hierarchies we have been socialized to accept. While these narrative types have been used by Bell to address racism, they are applicable to other -isms as well.

In addition to expanding the curriculum by developing a more accurate and complex history, key concepts and principles of social justice (e.g., socialization/social control, critical thinking, privilege, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, -isms, denial/resistance to social justice education, etc.) can be taught using current events, media/popular culture, and the students' life contexts and concerns. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012), bringing U.S. and Canadian perspectives to their work, explicate these foundational concepts of social justice with engaging real world examples. They enable the reader to critique and question their own socialized knowledge, as they challenge the thinking of privileged groups.

Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007) provide a strong theoretical foundation for social justice as well, and along with Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, and others (2010), they discuss various forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism,

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heterosexism, classism, religious bigotry, ageism, ableism, etc.). Adams, Bell, and Griffin (2007, p. 1) state, "The goal of social justice is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure."

Bickmore (2008) identifies "dimensions of democratic social interaction . . . [that] facilitate (or impede) social justice." They include a) communication and deliberation-related processes such as, advocacy, dissent, and consensus-building, b) institutional governance frameworks that provide "civil, legal, and political protections" and mechanisms to ensure "appropriate and consistent treatment of persons and problems," and c) "substantive equity," such as fairness, non-discrimination, and so on. In addition, the author shares insights regarding the integration of social studies and social justice.

To address the global stage we also need to look at relationships between nations and another set of concepts about the use and abuse of power that impacts those relationships. (e.g., nationalism/super-patriotism, political mythology in comparison with the actual values of the political system and democratic practices, the nature of political institutions and the legitimacy of its leaders, commitments to international human rights including economic rights, war/war crimes, foreign policy and practice/values for decision-making, imperialism, colonialism, cultural dominance, fair and moral treatment of other nations/peoples, transnational effects of government and business collusion, distribution of wealth, etc.). Numerous global issues and conflict zones of the world should be identified.

Global perspectives inform social action that can be taken in solidarity with marginalized groups worldwide, and they encourage us to reconsider our educational assumptions and commitments. An increasing number of curricula for human rights and global issues are now available online to support goals for global social justice.

Instruction can include exposing students to "the other," to controversial issues, and to service-learning for social justice on a local and/or global level. These approaches engage students' attitudes, values, and commitments, and direct their growth in the understanding of social justice. Students develop a more critical consciousness for social change as they increase their self-awareness, awareness of others, awareness of social issues, and ethic of service/involvement as change agents (Cipolle, 2010).

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Tensions between individual and community/group rights, freedom and responsibility, caring for others and ourselves, economic equity and individual achievement, and national and world views are encountered as students become more concerned about others, take responsibility as citizens, and come to see beyond their own experiences.

Speaking the truth to power and teaching about human rights and social justice issues can be challenging and even life-threatening depending upon where you are located. Those who have lost their lives for telling the truth and supporting human rights should be included among our heroes. Resistance to teaching social justice is to be expected, but we cannot let that deter us from responding to the needs of humanity in our communities, nations, and the world.

Consider that:

Poverty is “unacceptably high” in the United States, affecting 15% of all residents (46 million) and 20% of children under 18 (Coalition on Human Needs, 2012; U. S. Census, 2012). Half of the world’s population is living in poverty with the greatest population growth concentrated in the poorest countries (C-SPAN, 2011; Population Reference Bureau, 2011).

Child labor affects 246 million of the world’s children (15%) and one million in the U.S. (of 12 million). Over 10 million are involved in “drug-trafficking, sex work, and other hazardous labor.” (P.a.p. – Blog, 2012). Hundreds of thousands of children are soldiers. The numbers vary with continually changing armed conflicts. (Ibid.).

Every 3.6 seconds someone dies a hunger-related death. Over 800 million (1/3 of them are children) “go to bed hungry every day.” Six million children under 5 years old die every year from hunger (16/day). (Ibid.).

In the U.S. 750,000 people are homeless on any particular day. Those who are homeless at some time during the year number 1.5 million (325,000 being children). One-fifth are chronically homeless. More of these people are black, male, middle aged, veterans or disabled. (Ibid.).

Others have no country. Refugees numbered 33 million in 2006 and 15 million in 2011 with 800,000 of them new refugees, the highest number in the 21st century (Ibid.).

Hate groups have increased to over 1,000 in the U. S. according to the Southern Poverty Law Center, and they are increasingly targeting LGBT youth and adults. Across the world at least 10 countries support same sex marriage and in about the same number of countries, it is illegal to be gay and, it is punishable by death.

Casualties and deaths from war, violence against women, unemployment, illnesses, loss of property and lives from natural disasters, and many other concerns can be added to the list of human needs.

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When we respond with compassion and civic action, we see that social justice is the soul of social studies.

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