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2016-04-06

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Systemic Solutions to Systemic Problems of Injustice: Exploring Empathy and Self-Awareness in  
Preservice Teacher Training and the Preschool to Fourth Grade Classroom

Christina L. McElwee

Social justice issues are systemic problems of inequity that must be dealt with in a systemic way if they are to be resolved. It is my belief that resolution will come through the development of young children, ages preschool to fourth grade, via trained preservice teachers, equipped to teach about empathy and inequity while celebrating diversity.

The demographics of preservice teachers, which is anyone in training to become a teacher, and young children, more specifically children ages preschool to fourth grade, were chosen because these populations are the most easily reached and have the biggest influence on the future. Soon, young children will be adults, and preservice teachers will be in classrooms. Both elementary age children and preservice teachers hold great promise for the future and are a worthwhile investment because they are in a time of transition; child to adult, in training to in charge. Consider how much money has been set aside recently to increase funding of preschool programs, and the returns seen on that investment. In 2009, the federal stimulus package, titled the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, invested \$2.1 billion for Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Studies have shown returns on this investment in quality preschool programs ranging from 2:1 as high as 17:1. These early childhood programs help provide families with financial relief, create jobs, and better ready children for kindergarten and eventually adult life. It is clear that investing in our children from an early age is worthwhile and beneficial not only for the children, but for their parents and society as a whole (Watson & Pew Center, 2010, p. 5-6). Similarly, putting social justice curriculum in place for the demographics of preservice teachers and young children would be a good return on investment, as it too would be beneficial and have long reaching returns for society as a whole; this will be elaborated on towards the end of this paper.

One may ask why teachers already established in the field were not targeted. Examination was instead focused on preservice teachers because of the possibility of resistance from teachers already in the field. The idea of social justice curriculum could be brought into the school by an advocate, and endorsed by the principal. While the principal may be enthusiastic about the program and ask the teachers he or she employs to implement the social justice curriculum, teachers may resist, thinking they already do enough regarding social justice, or that this program is simply another thing to add to their already full lesson plan schedules. For this reason, already established teachers were not targeted.

Through the inspection of social justice curriculum implementation with the preservice teachers and preschool to fourth grade classrooms, it is discovered that there is a process to guide students through a social justice curriculum. Interestingly, despite the vast difference in age, the approach is very much the same for both groups. The essential sections of this process involve students first examining their own worldview, then celebrating the diversity found within their own classrooms, followed by learning about social justice issues and how they can make a difference. This paper will focus on the implementation of social justice curriculum within preschool to fourth grade classrooms, and the resources available to do so. Although the focus of this paper is on the younger age group, there are some resources for preservice teachers as well. These resources can either be used by instructors of preservice teachers to help guide them through social justice curriculum, or they may be used by preservice teachers to adapt lessons for their own young students. Such resources include: *Creative Resources for the Anti-bias Classroom* written by Nadia Saderman Hall, *Rethinking Early Childhood Education* edited by Ann Pelo, and *Roots & Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs* written by Stacey York. It is worth noting at this time that while there are some resources for teachers to use and students to interact with, there is overall a lack of resources to implement a social justice curriculum, particularly with young children. Hopefully more will be written, and there will be numerous lesson plans and various instructional materials to choose from, rather than having to create every lesson for social justice curriculum from scratch.

As students progress through the social justice curriculum design model, they first create a knowledge of self, learning about who they are and where they come from. This is key because as students learn about themselves, they develop self-awareness and dignity about who they are (Picower, 2012). Books to develop a student's worldview include: *We All Sing with the Same Voice* written by J. Philip Miller and Sheppard M. Greene, illustrated by Paul Meisel, *Let's Talk About Race* written by Julius Lester, illustrated by Karen Barbour, and *Is There Really a Human Race?* written by Jamie Lee Curtis, illustrated by Laura Cornell. The first two selections send the message that everyone is fundamentally the same, with *Let's Talk About Race* also discussing others' bias and opinions, which can certainly factor into someone's worldview. The third selection demonstrates that we are stronger when we work together. All three selections talk about race, which is imperative as ethnic identity plays a large role in the formation of a person's worldview. By using these texts, students can begin to understand themselves, as well as what makes them unique, all while celebrating their self-worth.

Having gained a more comprehensive and positive knowledge of themselves, students then share with their peers about their own cultural background. As they move through step two of the social justice curriculum design model, they begin to develop empathy, celebrate diversity, and break down stereotypes about peers' identities (Picower, 2012). Suggested texts to foster a celebration of diversity in a preschool to fourth grade classroom include: *All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!* written and photographed by Ellen B. Senisi, *The Sissy Duckling* written by Harvey Fierstein, illustrated by Henry Cole, and *You Can Call Me Willy: A Story for Children About AIDS* written by Joan C. Verniero, illustrated by Verdon Flory. These stories help to celebrate the diversity within the human race, including those that may have a disability or disease, or someone who does not conform to traditional gender roles. The books previously mentioned regarding race may also be used here to further celebrate diversity in the classroom. Through the books suggested for elements one and two of the social justice curriculum design model, each individual's worldview is explored and respect for diversity is cultivated.

Steps three and four in the social justice curriculum design model emphasize, respectively, education through the discussion of social injustice and the movements and social change that have happened as a reaction to injustice. Element three demonstrates to students the negative impact on various groups when diversity is not embraced. This impact comes in the forms of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and religious intolerance (Picower, 2012). Powerful ways to show this impact could be through reading and discussing one of these selections: *Baseball Saved Us* written by Ken Mochizuki, illustrated by Dom Lee, *Ruby's Wish* written by Shirin Yim Bridges, or *And Tango Makes Three* written by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, illustrated by Henry Cole. Each selection, respectively, discusses: racism experienced by Japanese Americans, sexism experienced by a Chinese girl who wished to pursue higher education, and homophobia experienced by a penguin with two fathers. By examining the impact of diversity, links are made between historical oppression and current conditions of people today.

Element four explores movements and social change, and students are taught about movements addressing social justice issues. These may include environmentalism, the civil rights movement, or the women's suffrage movement (Picower, 2012). In navigating these topics, the message that everyone can make a difference is highlighted. Books such as *The Adventures of a Plastic Bottle: A Story About Recycling* written by Alison Inches, illustrated by Pete Whitehead, *Brothers in Hope: The Story of the Lost Boys of Sudan* written by Mary Williams, illustrated by R. Gregory Christie, or *Susan B. Anthony: Fighter for Women's Rights* written by Deborah Hopkinson, illustrated by Amy Bates can all add something to the discussion. A book about recycling can highlight the importance of individuals recycling to keep the earth clean, or how the human race has damaged the environment. A picture book about the refugees of Sudan introduces students to the sometimes negative social change caused by war, as well as the importance of the kindness of one person, and how it can make a difference in the lives of others. The importance of one person's actions are again highlighted in the Susan B. Anthony book as she took action for the causes of women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery. In order for students to engage with the final two phases of the social justice curriculum design model, it is crucial that students understand that

everyone can make a difference, and that they make the connection that they can be the person who makes a difference.

As students learn about an array of social injustices, and become educated on the reactionary movements to these injustices, they themselves may wish to raise awareness for an issue they feel passionately about (Picower, 2012). Educating others by raising awareness functions as the fifth element of the social justice curriculum design model and is a pre-cursor for the sixth element, action. Raising awareness is taking a type of action, however it does not replace or complete the process of taking action. As the ultimate inspiration for raising awareness about an issue, students and teachers can look to the book *Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s I Have a Dream Speech in Translation: What It Really Means* written by Leslie J. Holland. This iconic speech helped to bring the issue of civil rights to a head, and may provide motivation for students as they advocate for their own chosen issue.

Building on element five, raising awareness, students may choose to take social action if they are truly impassioned. It is the teacher's job to help provide them with opportunities to take action. It may be beneficial for students to attempt to tackle an issue within their own community. Students can start and sign petitions, link with like-minded local grassroots organizations, or speak at public meetings about changing the status quo (Picower, 2012). An excellent guide for students and teachers through the often complicated process of taking action is *The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to solve the social problems you choose-and turn creative thinking into positive action* written by Barbara A. Lewis, which details how to write officials among other activist activities.

Students move through the six elements of the social justice curriculum design model, developing their worldview and respect for others, examining issues of social injustice, examining movements and social change, raising awareness, and taking social action, and along the way students cultivate empathy, self-awareness, critical thinking, and creative problem solving. They acquire self-awareness as they seek to understand their own worldview, and empathy as they seek to understand the worldview and struggles

of others. They develop critical thinking and creative problem solving skills as they reason through why issues of injustice are occurring and what can be done to stop them.

After engaging in a social justice curriculum, what should students be able to do? Students should be able to give examples of social justice issues, and identify concepts of fairness within those issues, thereby displaying empathy. Students should also have cultivated the ability to reflect on their own biases, and consequently identify who benefits in a situation, demonstrating self-awareness. With proper instruction, students should be able to develop solutions to injustices, recognizing as they develop these solutions whose voice is or is not heard. This involves both critical thought and creative problem solving. Finally, students should be able to advocate for justice and explain how things could be better, demonstrating empathy and problem solving creatively (Patrick, 2011).

Although this model presents many positive student benefits, benefits teachers' most likely attempt to cultivate anyway, there may be pushback from parents, administrators, or even students about the content being taught. These individuals who rail against social justice curriculum may view social justice education as an agenda, a waste of time, a threat to the parents' livelihoods, or overly burdensome on young children. This curriculum may be viewed as a political agenda by the political party a teacher supports, or the teacher's superiors may worry that not enough time is being spent on reading, writing, and arithmetic. Social justice curriculum is not meant as a political agenda; it is meant to make learners aware of their local and global surroundings, and to create a brighter tomorrow with less problems. Additionally, time does not need to be detracted from normal instruction. Instead, it can be an in class examination of the distribution of resources in a math problem, or a carefully selected read aloud picture book. Social justice curriculum may understandably be viewed as a threat to parents' livelihoods, for example when a teacher is advocating for renewable energy resources and a parent's occupation pertains to the coal industry. There is opportunity in this conflict to discuss the issue at hand and strive towards a workable solution, rather than get defensive. Finally, parents worry about their children's ability to handle these difficult topics. The following quote speaks particularly well to this concern.

Sometimes, adults may fear that raising social justice topics, particularly with early primary students, may only worry and not inform children. But children do not live in isolation from the world, and teachers play an important role in providing appropriate context to enhance children's understanding of the world in which they live. (Ministry of Education British Columbia, 2013, p. 21)

Raising social justice topics with college students is an equally worthwhile endeavor, and Duquesne University, a Catholic Spiritan School, makes a point of addressing social justice education within its student body. Taking a social justice course is a requirement for all students at the university, and is therefore built into the Early Childhood Education program, which certifies its students to teach preschool to fourth grade. This built in social justice course is focused on issues pertinent to their future classrooms, such as issues of sexuality and gender or food insecurity. In attempts to align with our Spiritan roots, social justice courses are often coupled with service learning. By putting in extra time, often outside of class, service learning is meant to solidify in class concepts through service and advocacy. Outside of mandated social justice courses, many seminars are offered annually on religious tolerance, race, and other social justice issues. There is occasional resistance from students, who deny such issues exist in the world, or are hesitant to participate in the class or any form of advocacy.

In conclusion, there are several major findings regarding the execution of and impact of the social justice curriculum design model. While the preservice teacher can be expected to at least touch on social justice curriculum during their time at university, there is no guarantee that social justice curriculum will reach the preschool to fourth grade age group. While there is not currently a set way of executing social justice curriculum for this young age group, the social justice curriculum design model is proposed as somewhat of a "formula" to social justice education and consequently remedying social injustices. Students, whether preservice teachers or elementary age students, must follow the formula of first examining their own worldview, learning to respect diversity, and then talking about and tackling issues of social injustice. Through the examination of social justice issues, empathy, self-awareness, critical

thinking, and creative problem solving skills can be cultivated. These skills can help in other areas of study. On a larger scale, if we develop empathetic, self-aware, critically thinking, creative problem solving children, we will have empathetic, self-aware, critically thinking, creative problem solving adults. Social change has a better chance of actually happening because of these empowered individuals, and theoretically, teacher training will not be needed in the future because many children will have been educated about and sensitive to issues of injustice. Hopefully, as time goes on, more books and curriculums will be written for the preschool to fourth grade age group, particularly by minority authors. With a wider availability of curriculum, perhaps more will be done to educate the demographics of preservice teachers and preschool to fourth graders about social justice issues.

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Special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Patricia A. Sheahan of Duquesne University, for her enthusiasm and guidance, as well as to Duquesne University's Maureen P. Sullivan Curriculum Collection for its excellent resources and inspiration. Thank you also to Duquesne University's Honors College and Duquesne University's Gumberg Library, who made this opportunity possible; as well as the Reference Desk Librarians at Gumberg Library, who helped perfect my paper and guide me through this process.

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